

Alone

by Electromotive Force

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Summary: The Inner Colonies dwindle. Mankind's extinction draws near as its insuperable enemy scatters and defeats the UNSC with increasing momentum. Now, at the height of The Great War, the colonial defense forces of Zaragosa Prime are able to fend off the might of the Covenant. How is it possible? As Lima Company's enemies close in all around them, they are forced to uncover this mystery.

1. Alone

"Shakespeare!"

I tucked away the note pad as fast as I could and stared back at Gunnery Sergeant Smith.

"What the piss is wrong with you?!" The NCOIC barked.

"Sir, just reviewing the pre-mission brief!" I had to yell at the top of my lungs back to the Gunny. The wind outside the open hatch was like a freight train. Lungs had to compete with the vacuum-like draft for air. Of course, the pre-mission brief had already been uploaded to each of our HUDs in case anyone was late or drowsy during the real brief less than an hour ago.

"Bullshit! You're writing haikus and shit." A jesting smile spread across his face for an almost imperceptible instant.

I smiled and once again placed my attention out the rear hold, unable to help myself from staring at the Spartan-II next to it.

"Gotta love the Gunny." said a voice nearby. "Great guy."

I looked over to the Marine sitting adjacent to me.

"You'll get a hard time from him being the FNG, but he's cool. You'll

see."

I smiled, not knowing any other way to reply.

"Haven't seen good old trees and ink in years." He said. "Keeping a diary there?"

"Something like that."

"You a writer or something?"

"You could say that. Started when I joined back in twenty-five fifty."

"Corps make you introspective like so many others?"

"Eh, I don't know. When I wasn't running missions or training for missions, well, wasn't much doing anything. You know how it goes. This helps me stay sane and out of trouble during the hurry-up-and-waits. People know me as Shakespeare. My real name is Blake Pennington. Private Pennington if you want to keep it in context."

He nodded, looked away.

A very bright flash stole every occupant's attention for a fraction of a second. Eyes darted to the rear, staring far off out the hatch. It was extremely distant, in fact below the horizon aft of us. Whatever was out there, it likely no longer existed. The birefringence from a blast of such magnitude extended high into an altostratus sheet of cloud cover, adding overt clarity to the night. Without a sound, the plume of light softly waned and dark took over again.

All eyes went to where they were before.

We hadn't touched down yet. Actually, we were a long ways away from it. I remembered the map in the briefing room prior to launch. With our average velocity, I estimated about twenty clicks before we hit dirt. Lima Company was running alternate QRF tonight.

"I heard about you, the writer. What are you writing about this time?"

"Just some poem to pass the time."

"Can I see it?"

"Sure, I guess."

I handed it over and he read:

_Alone, she sits
>Gazing beyond
Weapons, her only friend
>_
>I hope that she'll live
Live through this day
>Soon, maybe, she'll mend

_We fly into chaos
>Seeking the foe
Never to rest in this War_

_We share one mind
>Tonight, we'll fight
When will it be no more?_

_The skies are red
>Red like our wrath
We will never surrender!_

_We pray for the day
>When we can rejoice
This we long to remember_

_For these days are cursed
>These days are strange
Why should it be this way?_

_They brought us no peace
>Only the sword
Colonies burned away_

_They killed her brothers
>Killed her sisters
Killing all that she knew_

_She's fought since then
>Exacted revenge
Biting more than could chew_

_Tough as nails
>Rough as sails
Spartan, she stands alone_

_But weak at the core
>Battered from war
I hope she finds a home_

_The ship will pitch
>The ship will roll
The ship will descend into the fray
>_
>I start to wonder
I start to pray
>Praying this won't be her last day

_I can't see her face
>Though, she's just like me
Faster, stronger,
different_

_Becometh a hero
>Feeleth no fear
She's angry, tired, distant_

_A draft then swirls
>Into the hold
The battle is now at hand_

_We start our descent
>Into the dirt
Here, she makes her stand_

_I hope that she'll live
>Live through this day
__I hope that she will survive_

_To see that this life
>Is not blood and tears
__She can feel alive_

Without any particular expression, he handed it back to me, saying,
"Intense, brother."

"Yeah, that's kind of what I was going for."

"It's nice work. Reads like something you'd see in a war journal. I think I know who this is about, too. It's about her, isn't it? Yeah,

I saw you eyeballing that green armor."

"So, I guess prime QRF is in some deep shit." I said, speaking loudly over the engines' drone. "Hopefully that wasn't them back there."

"Doubt it." he replied. "Whenever we're mobilized, it's probably just the bastards' usual hit-and-run. You could set your watch by their strategy and truthfully it's a little mundane. The only thing that changes is the location. Per usual, we'll score a few kills on the perimeter before we can get the chance to assault the main force and after we respond another cluster of 'em will pop up elsewhere, blow some shit up, then disappear. They do this at night. Always at night. They're pussies." He shrugged. "Keeps us busy, I guess."

I nodded. Just an acknowledgement signal. But I strongly felt we were headed to battle this night despite the humdrum routine the more experienced Marines had settled into. Strangely, some of the best ideas came to me right before firefights. I guess it was the brain on overdrive, the adrenaline racing throughout the body giving me that elusive, creative spark I rarely knew of. I would enjoy it for now, but when I hit dirt the good side of it goes away. It's where my _other _writs come into play. The vivid, violent ones that people knew me for. The one I just wrote was special, though. I wouldn't share it again.

I became aware of the same Marine glancing my direction again, seeming to scrutinize me every few seconds.

"Is there anything wrong with my loadout?"

"No, you're alright. Everything seems rigged correctly. But you do seem unusually at ease tonight."

I propped my rifle on the deck and rested my hands over the muzzle, straightening my posture. "Why's that?"

He cracked a mellow smile. "You're one of the few motionless bodies in this bloodtray."

"Well, all this gear and body armor is killing my back. The less I move, the less I think about it." I shrugged lightly.

"You don't know it yet, but most of the Marines your age are scared shitless. Just takes time to see it. But you pull off composure like a ten-year veteran. What's the secret?"

I shrugged. "No secret. I just daydream a lot, maybe too much."

"You must really have a death-wish. Last guy I saw not paying attention was sent home covered in plasma burns."

"Well, in my old unit the others thought that same thing you did from time to time. Thought I was either crazy, depressed or just pretending to be one of the two because I never squirmed before things got real. They called me The Introvert. That was until they discovered I was writing all the time. Told them I preferred Shakespeare."

"Well, lucky you, then. Some here crack jokes to ease the tension,

sometimes on each other, but mostly on her. The other, more hardcore folks rehearse Jujitsu in case it comes to that. Others strip and clean their rifles until it could probably pass a depot-level magnaflux inspection. Everyone has their ways, but now you're the newcomer, just some FNG from another world. You know what that means."

"Means everyone's got a hard-on for me, wants to find out what makes me tick until I'm either KIA or some other FNG comes along and steals the spotlight."

"Yep, and it's bad enough you're the current FNG, but you're the FNG whose reputation already precedes him among the higher-ups. Guess you made a name for yourself in training. That means twice-as-tall hard-on for you."

"And probably twice as hard. Well, I suppose some of the junior NCOs and lower enlisted will pay particular attention to me for a while."

He nodded. "Just hope they don't resent your cool head or you'll never get a moment's peace after combat."

"Why is that bad? I assumed it was a good thing for someone to have thick skin in the Marine Corps."

"It is. But there is such a thing as having too thick a skin. You'll get attention that way as well. Just my opinion, but that's one of the reasons Amy was alienated from the beginning."

"That Spartan?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking in her direction, "And what other reasons?"

From what I gathered, she sat alone all the time as if invisible to her comrades, always staring out the open rear hatch and into the world we passed by. She was like me, a ghost in her own shell, her gaze locked solid onto the tent of sweeping foliage below as if swept up in a vivid memory herself.

"I think she'd rather it be this way anyways," he said, "and let's just say she's not a real talker to begin with. She'd rather just look and think, like you. The Gunny keeps the hatch open for her every drop. They have some sort of understanding."

"What understanding?"

All I could see from my seat was blackness with the occasional flash of distant bombardment. It was the only stable reference for the horizon, the eerie pulses of light and chaos far beyond somehow comforting to a distant observer.

He sighed and reluctantly elaborated. "Gunny and a select few here know about her past and it ain't pretty. Some people in Lima Company probably wouldn't handle it the right way, so he keeps the fraternization level at a low. No one really makes casual conversation with her, and it's certainly not condoned. But make no

mistake, Shakespeare, once the bullets and the plasma start flying they'll never lose sight of that gold visor. She's the best asset in any ground engagement and she'll keep you alive."

"And other than that, she's off limits."

"Yeah, that's the running trend in this unit."

"She deserves friends too. Hell, she's a hero."

"Yeah, but it's for good reason."

I nodded while mulling over his words. He spoke them with subtle conviction, and I sensed they were true. I couldn't help but feel sympathy towards her and a disdain towards them, the War, the whole galaxy.

The universe finds ways of tempering you into something you weren't.

Nevertheless, I admired her. I sensed her plight and felt her courage, but I could never be her. She is superhuman. She is a Spartan.

And though every man, woman, and child passionately hates the Covenant, I couldn't possibly know the true measure of her rage...

"Corporal, I still don't think I understand fully. I question the Gunny's reasoning on this one. I mean, why isolate her if she's so effective? Couldn't we all gain something from her experience?"

"Well, you're a Marine just like the rest of us." he said rhetorically, carelessly fastening a carabiner to his primary weapon. The spring-loaded metal slapped shut with a _clack _that was louder than anything that instant. "So, you know that Section Two will tell people what they want to hear. Civilians think the War isn't getting any closer to them. People of Earth think we're winning. They think we're winning because of Spartans. They know they'll never die, but Amy knows differently."

"Okay."

"She prefers not to get close to anyone these days, and I can't say I'd blame her."

_Of course, _I thought. S_he's lost friends in combat. Understandable._

"But everyone's lost someone out there."

"True," he said, "but she's lost a little more than _that_, Shakespeare. Beta Hydrii was her homeworld. They glassed it decades ago."

I looked back to her. Five clicks out and she starts her weapon's final inspection.

2. Fate's Course

****Fate's Course****

I knew something had gone awry. Multi-axial inertia invaded the pit of my stomach and the engines of the Pelican screamed with delight as if mocking my vertigo. We rolled into a steep bank and everyone grabbed hold of something solid to stabilize themselves in the high-gee maneuver. A sliver of illumination caught the corner of my eye. Moonlight that wasn't there a second ago rotated into view. It razored through the clouds, streaking through the cockpit windows and into the troop bay, then the Pelican stabilized.

The one I'd spoken with earlier grunted and shifted body weight after the hairpin maneuver was complete, then he looked to me.

"So now you know. Don't broadcast it on the evening news, roger?"

"I won't tell anyone about her unless you say so."

We were being diverted. Whether by choice or by circumstance, the troops usually never knew. Apparently our landing coordinates weren't good, which meant the operation was FUBAR or there were now higher priority taskings. I prayed we still had safe options this early, but in all likelihood there weren't any. From what I gathered, Lima Company was the most 'used and abused' unit in this entire star system. But that's where the real progress was realized.

I still couldn't see anything out the open rear hold, but I knew she could.

"She has the eyes of a hawk."

I looked over again, not sure how to respond. Before I could muster a reply...

"I know some of the men in Lima Company would volunteer to become a Spartan in a heartbeat if they had the chance. I probably would too, in spite of the surgeries they receive."

"Everyone wants to be a hero." I smiled.

"Sometimes, I wonder if they felt any of it. You know? The physical pain, the mental pain...losing their family and their innocence so quickly."

I realized my gaze was frozen to the deck. I looked back at him but he'd already turned the other way.

"No bother though." he said, suddenly meeting my incessant stare. "Our unit has a great track record so far with just one supersoldier. Over four-thousand confirmed kills, and the chest candy to prove it. Nice little rack of ribbons and medals on her service dress, maybe you'll live long enough to see for yourself at the next award ceremony."

"Well, I gotta admit that I was shocked when they told me of my new assignment to Zaragosa Prime and Lima Company, and I still can't believe I'm gonnaâ€" "

"Wait, you still say Zaragosa? How long have you been here?"

"Just a few weeks, really."

"Use Zagosa. You can also just say Gosa. Hardly anyone ever says Zaragosa anymore. Maybe just the politicians and those other high society types."

"Roger. Man, I still can't believe I'm gonna be fighting alongside an honest-to-God Spartan."

"Consider yourself very lucky, then. Most people only hear about them. You're in the history books just for being here, but remember your OPSEC indoctrination. Don't go yapping your experiences here to all your friends back home. I take it you heard about the first and only Marine to do so?"

"Yeah, I know. I was given explicit instructions not to tweet before I got re-assigned."

"This your first combat drop in Lima?"

"Yeah."

"You excited?"

"Hell yeah! So, if I break the trend and act friendly toward her, will I get in trouble? She easy to talk to?"

"Heh, don't bet on scoring a photo op with her or anything. I think making friends with her is one of those luxuries you'll never indulge in. Me neither, not as long as we're at war. No time these days."

"Yeah, stupid thinking I could. They probably keep her busy as hell."

"Better believe that."

"And it seems the only friend she's got here is that rifle she's caring for."

"Good observation, Shakespeare. Now what'd you say your real name was?"

"Blake Pennington." I held out a hand.

He shook it, saying, "Blake Holmes."

"Another Blake."

He smiled back and we enjoyed the ride for the moment. Suddenly, the Spartan re-entered my thoughts.

"...Knew a girl like her once."

"You knew a girl like her? How the hell did that turn out for you?"

"It was nothing much. When I was a kid. She just reminds me of her, they way she carries herself I guess. Don't listen to me if you don't want to. I won't take offense. I've always been told I was a bit of a rambler."

"Well, maybe one day you can actually meet her, when the mask is gone and there are no formalities between you."

I remained silent. Holmes seemed a thoughtful and well-spoken individual, though he held a quiet air about him with an implied distance to be kept at all times. I'd heard many different dialects and speech mannerisms from my brief travels during the old training days. It was the most inter-colonial movement I'd ever experienced. I wanted to ask him what world he was from, but felt I'd get the chance later.

"Brotherhood's all we have left, anyways." Holmes said rather morbidly. "You'll never hear an officer admit it, but the UNSC's hanging by a thread. Paris Four, Herforst. I was sure we'd see the end when we lost the Jericho system, but I guess we're still here. Should've seen some of the troops' reactions when they found out Amy was from Beta Hydrii. I mean, what's next? People are tired of running and fighting. I'm tired. I _know _she's tired."

What was a polite and stimulating conversation between us suddenly turned grim and sobering. I could hear the wind buffeting as it met the cavity of the hold, the air around the Pelican shuddering into the drop bay and pelting my helmet. The noise of the turbines grew louder, caught in my ears.

"But there's hope here in Zagosa Prime." Holmes said with a catch in his voice. And I knew it to be true. The UNSCDF staved the Covenant onslaught twice now. The outcome was definitely in Zagosa's favor each time. "It seems a little odd," he continued, "but we must be doing something right."

"Yeah, I heard about that on my way from Reach. I think it's amazing what you all have done here. I'm sure other units out there are watching you all very closely too."

"But it's come at a terrible cost just like any other place. Some of us wonder why we don't just pull out, abandon the planet, take what we have and run. To Reach, Mamore, Minister, somewhere more populated and better defended. Maybe it's propaganda, you know? Instilling hope in people. Keep them fighting. Inspire a few more civvies to answer the call. You never know, maybe we'll win our _own _war right here. Until then, it's bite and crawl."

"So, feel free to silence me, but it seems odd that a Spartan is attached to our unit."

"No, you're absolutely right. It is _quite_ odd. At least, it would seem that way until you've worked with us for a little while."

"Why do you say that?"

"Look around you."

I did as Holmes asked. "Okay."

"Notice these Marines are packing just a little more equipment than your average Leatherneck?"

"A little, so?"

"It never struck you as odd that you were ordered to take all the advanced training courses and get issued all these extra goodies?"

"Not saying it didn't."

"Okay...ever take time to ponder why a company is led by a Gunnery Sergeant and not a Captain or LT?"

"Yeah, why is that?"

"We're highly mobile, Shakespeare. We're not bound by most standards. Lima got repurposed about half a year ago. That's about the time Amy came along, by the way. Gunny Smith took the helm and we went from a standard infantry unit to some kinda weird, assymetric task force. All our brass stays put at HQ and focuses on intel aspects. I'm pretty sure we're the only unit of our kind in the entire UNSCDF. We have complete autonomy from higher headquarters if we need it. Can't do that with some fresh academy grad leading the charge. That's why we do without them. Smith is the acting officer."

"You know it won't last, right? Eventually the brassholes will push a command structure down on top of Lima and all this convenience will vaporize."

He shook his head in reply.

"You're sure of that? Lima can just carry on with only an NCOIC?"

"Experience wins in this case. There's no Lieutenant or Captain experienced enough to do his job. We do have a Colonel somewhere up there that we supposedly report to from time to time, but I've never seen his face. Guess we're too busy for pomp and circumstance these days. We are pretty much the tip of the spear on this planet. We're one of just a select few units that see action on a weekly basis. You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"No problem here. Consider me born to kill."

"Then I think you'll do just fine in Lima Company, Pennington."

"So...no officers. Ever."

"No, this unit's manning document specified him. By name, Blake."

"Then they'll commission him in the field. I'm telling you, it's coming."

Adamant, he replied simply with, "Nope."

"Well, you seem pretty confident. I guess I'll just have to smile and nod."

"Yep, no officers in Lima Company. Good thing, too. I can't stand lieutenants."

"Why? Is it because theyâ€"

"â€fucking know everything."

"Well, the Gunny doesn't seem elitist. Seems pretty down to Zagosa."

"He thought about going warrant-officer, but he's short on university credits." Holmes shrugged. "Whatever. He's sharper than any officer I've seen. Has Amy's respect and that's saying something. He might honestly still think of himself as a rifleman. Hasn't lost the skill for Covy-killing. Had one of the best accuracy ratings before he got put in charge."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing. He just couldn't get as much trigger time in at the range because he's always too busy submitting AARs and making sure things were running smoothly out here and back at Battalion HQ. Some of us have bets going as to who can reach his kill count before making staff sergeant."

"Good luck."

"Yeah."

"Well, seems like we have the best here."

"Both personnel and equipment, at least most of it. Sometimes even we have to get by with standard issue gear. But we've got some endowments, aside from the Spartan of course."

"Why do you suppose _she's_ here? The heavy hitter or something? Ace up your sleeve?"

"It's a long story, but you'll hear it someday. For now, just know that Gunny and Oh-Seven-One have a history together that goes way back, back before even Lima Company was reactivated and recruiting the finest Devil Dogs into its ranks."

"Can't wait, man."

He leaned closer to me. "Lima Company will see some _real_ action tonight, I can just feel it. I'm glad too because I'm angry." He removed his helmet and placed it into his lap. "I was helping a girl cross the street just last week." he spoke slower. "She fumbled with her databinders and they fell, so I ran over to her and scooped them up for her. I checked both directions and sent her on her way. She got to the other side and smiled at me. She turned around and then space debris from a destroyed Seraph crashed down on her, severed both her legs. I'm gonna kill some fuckin' Covenant tonight!"

The ship instantly nosed up, climbing ferociously fast. The mission suddenly crossed the realm between daily routine and utter realism, fate granting Holmes his bloodlustful vengeance-wish.

My bones felt hollow as the lift and thrust of the Pelican overcame its weight and drag.

"Heads up, Devil Dogs! We're goin' in high!" the Gunny yelled over all the noise. "TAC insertion, so get your shit wired and tight!"

"There it is." Holmes said, pulling out night vision goggles from his rucksack. "Straight from the Gunny himself. And what the Gunny says, is."

The already-dimmed lights overhead changed from amber to a forewarning red. I checked and rechecked my ammo, my survival gear, my altimeter, helmet, gloves, Oxygen apparatus, everything.

I paused for a few seconds and checked my breath, my heartbeat caught in between my ears. I exhaled slowly. Better.

"Tactical Aerial Combat insertions, hoo-rah! Fuggin' love 'em!" someone said dispassionately.

"Doesn't get any more real than this!" another shouted back. "Why we get paid the _high_-cred!"

Holmes leaned over. "LZ's apparently too dangerous for a pelican gunship."

"Son of a bitch." I whispered.

"This could get rough. The whole terrain is probably peppered with Covenant triple-A fire. We're probably gonna HALO it from thirty-thou. I hope whoever packed your chute in the armory put a little extra pride into it. Seems it's running short these days."

I checked the seals on my jump mask. If I didn't check for leaks, I could be flirting with death. The Atmospheric Internally-Regulated Supply (AIRS) was 100 percent Oxygen. Air that high up was too damned thin. For now, I reached for a tube along the ceiling, placed it in my mouth, and was rewarded with some pure O2. The other leathernecks followed suit.

I began breathing normally, flushing out the Nitrogen in my system until I felt euphoria. Too much N2 and not enough Oxygen would inevitably lead to hypoxia up there. I could faint, and thus die because I wouldn't be able to open my chute. Though we all had automatic opening devices, but I wasn't gonna put all my eggs in one basket with an electronic barometer. Even if it did open, I wanted to land awake and frosty and not captured or dead.

I checked my gear and made sure there was no rips. As you approached terminal velocity from 30k feet or higher, the sheer draft of air rushing to your face was enough to take the breath right out of you, not to mention, it was cold as shit up there. I donned my dry suit, made mostly of polypropylene and Kevlar-ceramic weaves. It would keep me warm and stave off the frost bite. It would also subdue a pesky annoyance—a friction they call "rush rash" from the air turbulence tearing at your skin.

Across the deck 'Hazy' Haze had the most comfortable, shit-eating grin across his face. It made me want to laugh. I think we were all

feeling the effects of the pure oxy at this point.

Though his reputation preceded him (just like everyone else here), I met him along with my first Lima Company meal at the mess hall a fortnight ago. I naturally took a liking to him. He was outspoken like I always wished I was. But Private Ryan 'Hazy' Haze was the typical loudmouth Marine you'd see in a poorly-written action movie, the ones with gratuitous violence and random, cheesy one-liners. He just turned 21 and got hazed well for it, with a double kegger, courtesy of the Gunny. Gunny Smith thought that maybe just one inkling of alcohol would calm the kid down, but no.

There was nothing really noticeable about PFC Haze. He was just your average Marine to me, but you sure noticed him when he spoke up. He was usually on peoples' nerves just for the sake of it. He was quick to start an argument and quick to keep it going as long as he could, and smiled the whole time while doing it. It took quite a few people a while to realize that Haze was more or less born to antagonize and instigate.

Holmes took notice of Haze and I staring at one another.

"Be careful, he likes to get a rise out of people."

"I know." I studied Haze as he did me. "So, is he all there?" I asked of Holmes next to me. "Is he mentally straight?"

"Wouldn't be in Lima if he wasn't. But it's okay. He's just a little hot-headed. This whole show is just his way of breaking the ice or getting to know you. But God damn, he is actually pretty annoying sometimes. I remember the first day I met him, he claimed to be this weapons guru. Swore up and down the MA5B was the best weapon out there. He would discredit other peoples' choice in armament, I think, simply because he hated being wrong."

"I ain't worried about it," I said, "I always try to be as nice as I can to everyone."

But upon saying tht to Holmes, Haze unbuckled his restraint harness and approached me. Gunny Smith wasn't having any horseplay.

"Haze, get yourself back in your seat before you get ass-stomped by my boot!"

The Private gave a weak sneer and complied. Before seating himself, he the yelled at the top of his lungs over the draft in the bay, "Shakespeare, you nervous?"

I played along. "Me? Nah. Why you ask?"

"You keep fiddling with your shit like it's an erector set. Don't worry! Mission Support Group takes good care of us. Haven't lost a single grunt from faulty equipment...yet."

I nodded to him, gesturing that I understood and suggesting the end of the conversation.

"You did good, Holmes whispered. Frankly, I didn't feel like watching you waste your breath. And I sure as hell didn't feel like listening to him. Trust me...in time you'll understand. If you can end the

conversation as quickly as possible, everyone benefits from it. The longer you humor him, the longer he'll carry on. Mostly it just ends in him trying to belittle you or something to that effect, but I think right now he's too at ease from the Oxygen to press on any further. So, again, consider yourself very lucky. Breathe the good air for now."

So we all sat, waiting for the Gunny's signal to jump. The smell of old paint on old metal was infused with the maple syrup scent of the pure Oxygen. The innards of the pelican were definitely worse for the wear. The other birds in formation were likely the same: combat-tested and in growing need of maintenance and attention. Lima Company's small fleet of war horses had already lived past its better days for sure. We were all relaxed, perfectly tranquil in our pseudo-inebriated state, steadily en route to our point of insertion. Our bodies were calm, yet we possessed some hyper-vigilance, some omniscient understanding. I could sense more than the mere presence of the troops, I could sense what they were thinking, or so it seemed. Chatter had ceased and all that remained was concentration. The entirety of Lima Company possessed the same mind at this moment: we were heading into another battle within this great war. Within that collective mindset, there were the individual personalities overridden by years of military training and experience, battle-hardened wits and physical abilities within each of us. Though every person was unique in their own way, we shared a common purpose tonight. Together, we'd act as a single, unified machine engineered for destroying.

The red glow inside the ship pulsed, the pilot indicating we were over the drop zone.

"Here we go." Holmes slapped my kneepad.

The Gunny sliced a hand through the air. Next, everyone looked to Amy. She still gazed out the open rear hatch.

It was weird to feel such a premonition, but right from the get-go I had the hunch she knew we were gonna HALO jump all along.

She jumped.

And she seemed to fall in slow motion, my reflexes like that of a mountain lion.

The thought quickly vanished. I concentrated harder with the aid of an Oxygen-rich brain. I wished this feeling would last forever, but it would subside shortly after I hit dirt and I got that first puff of nature's air. Then I'd be afraid all over again and I'd have to rely on my creativity to get me through. If I survived the mission, I'd probably remember every detail, then pen up the usual poetry on it, and everyone would inevitably read it.

One marine drops, two, three, four. Haze dropped. I'm up.

I approached the last smidgeon of Pelican hull, stading there for just a moment, the rush of adrenaline coming to a climax inside me. Anticipating the free-fall, I pushed off and stretched out my arms like a soaring eagle and I started to gain speed. After a brief second I felt empty, hollow. The wind whipped at my mask. Before I knew it, I pierced through a patch of clouds like a scalpel through

onion skin. I was weightless, traveling at terminal velocity. The wind was like a draft as it rushed by my ears, much fiercer than the draft inside the Pelican—"so far up now"—an eternity away as I looked back.

I pushed aside the joy and checked my altimeter. Passing twenty-thou, falling fast, I switched my HUD to infrared. I panned my optics around as slowly and as purposefully as I could as dozens of radar contacts registered in all directions—the rest of Lima Company falling into loose formation. As I took in the sight of white caps forming atop the surf far below in the moonlight, I hoped we'd all make it.

I fell through a last remaining squall of thick cloud layer. Emerging on the other side, there was the landscape of Zagosa Prime. I could barely see it even with full gamma correction. But I could make out the outlines of riverbeds, mountains, valleys. There were never city lights on after dusk, not since the colony-world was discovered by the Covenant some months prior. Indoor light usage was heavily policed at night so that no more than a hundred lumens escaped the troposphere. And no more than a deciwatt shows up on aerial thermal scans. They couldn't know anything about how or where the UNSCDF staged from, especially any Special Ops Forces stationed here. Most importantly, civilian lives were at stake on a daily basis just by someone plugging in a toaster oven. Most people had below-ground fallout shelters where they spent much of their waking lives.

I checked my air supply as I sailed closer to the land. I hadn't yet asphyxiated so I must've been doing well. I still had about 25 liters compressed at 800 psi. All green and in the norm. Another reading from my altimeter: eighteen-thou. Per standard operating procedure, the Gunny would be coming over TEAMCOM any second for mission objectives and ground formation parameters. But nothing came. The Gunny's Staff Sergeant instead broadcasted over the net.

"Gunny! Are you awake? Gunny! What's the sit-rep?"

Command orders came directly from Intel and we're fed to Gunnery Sergeant Smith in real time. If he couldn't give them to us, we'd be lost. The Staff Sergeant did the only thing he could do: he executed the command for the Gunny's stim packs to activate. Just glorified olfactory refreshments—alcohol in the breathing apparatus. The raw scent of isopropyl would surely wake him up, assuming his blood wasn't saturated with Carbon-Dioxide at this point if it was an apparatus failure. He'd succumb to respiratory acidosis, a ninety-percent fatality rate. All we could do was pray he hadn't lost his air supply.

"Worrying won't change anything at this point." the Staff Sergeant said, feeling our thoughts. "We would all love to have the luxury of worrying, but we're still falling. Press on."

Another two-thousand feet went by and the Staff Sergeant came over the net once more. "Listen up, team. Covenant light infantry have taken up positions around the Foreclay Mining Facility. Provincial Marines and battle-ready personnel have taken up defensive fighting positions all around the perimeter of the complex, but the North side is hurting for aid and reinforcements. This is where we come in...

"We need to hoof it to the North side, link up with host combat personnel, and dish out some pain to the uglies. At dirt, set up formation Delta. We go swift and silent to the rally point...on the tac map now. Medics take care of the Gunny at touchdown, give me status on his condition and advise on medical proceedings."

Two green acknowledgement blips illuminated in the upper-right corner of my HUD near the TEAMCOM designator, and thus everyone knew the combat medics understood.

Without warning, my AOD deployed the parachute and negative inertia sprang in me. I was halted from terminal velocity to just a brisk float. Shortly after, I checked the altimeter one last time: seventy-five meters—perfect height for a combat landing. Minimal hang time meant I could disappear into surroundings very quickly. Stealth was now my first objective.

Again, my thoughts went to Smith as I lingered for a moment not too far above a row of pine trees, floating steadily down. But there was nothing I could do.

So, my thoughts instinctively went to Amy. I wanted to be alongside her as we made our way through the tangle. I always had a fascination. I was mesmerized by the rumors, the buzz of media outlets, of Section Two's efforts. I was caught up in the fervor of humanity's last, best, green-armored hopes. Now I'd see those hopes put into action with my own two eyes and I could hardly wait.

It seemed as though the ground rose to meet my feet.

3. Jungle Heat

****Jungle Heat****

Firm pressure impacted the soles of my boots and resonated upwards through my shins, to my knees, up my thighs, and into the base of my spine. I was too damned focused on details to remember not to bend my knees at touchdown. I tucked to the side in my practiced fall, threw out an elbow to the ground to stabilize me. A slight pain draped my lower back until I willed it away.

I hovered there in a half crouch, my assault rifle leveled into the forest. Drawing a deep breath, I studied the edge of the treeline. The forest stood out. The wooded tangle obscured what possible threats lied further in. I panned my eyes in a slow, undulating pattern, holding my ground perfectly still and balanced, breathing deeper. I felt one with the shapes of pines and furs, got a good feel for the earth below my feet, inhaled the scent of fragrant tree sap and dank moisture in the air. I became a spectre.

If the enemy was remotely combat-savvy, they'd spot at least one of us from considerable distance.

I pulled my chute inwards, crumpled it and detached it from my back. It was buried along with the wrapper of a freshly-eaten nutrient wafer.

I discarded my spent AIRS reservoir and inventoried everything I had—made sure nothing flew away on the ride down. Combat knife,

ample amount of med kits, flares, smoke grenades, camouflage tarps, RFID chits, my Spread Spectrum radio, spare ammo, and most importantly my primary weapon—carabinered to the front of my armor. My sidearm was holstered at my hip.

All ship-shape.

I prayed the other Marines made it down as easily.

I disrobed my polys and shoved them into my rucksack. The jump ensemble was priceless and my best friend on TAC missions. I would reuse it again someday. Higher-ups would have us believe they were worth more than all the training and background investigations spent on us.

I pulled down the HUD over my face and scanned to the left and right for friendlies, performed a head count once I identified the first Marine in sight. All present and accounted for, all groundside, two minutes later. But the icons were stationary. No one moved. I calmed my worst suspicions by occupying myself on a jungle scan once again, realizing the rest of Lima Company was likely accomplishing the same, getting situated. With any luck, no Covenant forces were stationed this far out from their own objective: this backwoods mining outpost.

To the distance were strings of thunder claps echoing off the looming foothills of the valley, resounding gently like the pounding of tympanies. AAA fire where we would've touched down. Intel was at least spot-on in one aspect of the mission.

Our original LZ was no good. We were far away from where we should've been. Only the high-ranking analysts in some unknown bunker knew what kind of impact that currently had on our mission as they studied the broader picture. Everyone knew, though, that where one advantage was lost another was gained. We now had an element of surprise on our side. Exploited long enough, we could avoid contact. We could approach from an unanticipated vector, unnoticed. As I scanned my surroundings like I was trained to, I couldn't help but steal a moment and wonder why the Hell Covenant uglies would be interested in a mine shaft. Were they were hurting for resources carrying on this drawn-out campaign against Zagosa Prime? I hadn't known any planet to meet a fate other than glassing as a Covenant campaign progressed, but maybe they saw this planet as special. Maybe they wanted this one for themselves.

During the course of my week-long inbrief to the combat element of Lima Company, I'd learned that this Covenant expeditionary force employed an almost defensive posture as they rooted themselves across the many continents. They scattered their forces at first, making it harder for space-borne assets and force recon to track their erratic movements. Intel analysts the planet-over could not form coherent assessments, or at least any assessment that was in agreement with others. No one knew the enemy's strike patterns, they were so inconsistent and sudden, ending almost as quickly as they occurred. With hit-and-run tactics on civilian targets, they diverted UNSCDF geo-location resources en masse while their more robust brother units advanced on military industrial centers. When any of their FOBs were discovered and subsequently attacked, they devoted significant firepower to defend them, simultaneously dispatching remote units to again invade civilian populations throughout the globe, suggesting

that each disparate sub-army had the exact same objective: to buy each other more time. Time for what?

Maybe it was a war of attrition. Tire us out. A slow death from a thousand cuts. No bother, the human spirit was forever a stubborn one.

I always knew I'd see which side was victorious in my lifetime.

I stayed put until the highest ranking said otherwise. So I sat, waited, no comm. traffic.

It was radio silence now as the rest of Lima Company was live.

I checked my gear until I was convinced it wasn't going anywhere. I took a sip of water. My elation was officially over, my blood no longer Nitrogen-free. My senses came back to normal and all the waiting built more anxiety, threatening to overcome my confidence. I felt vulnerable, a sitting duck, a bullseye myself. The only comfort to be had was the fact that it was dark, barely any moonlight with so much cloud cover. I was trained to hold out, nevertheless. I couldn't jump to conclusionsâ€”a risk in itself.

A crackle came over the net. Anticipation was getting the better of me.

Another bout of static.

"Soâ€”thought the old Gunny was gonna sit this one out, did ya?"

I let out a thankful sigh. Green acknowledgement lights flashed like fireflies across my HUD and I soon joined the silent uproar.

"Word is," the Gunny resumed, "We're green for go. Formation Delta. For you newbies out there, Amy's got point. She is in tactical command. Between us and the rally point, there's ten clicks of jungle and squid bait. Let's get some."

The moment I had been waiting for. The moment all of us had been waiting for. For nearly two weeks of downtime, it was finally time for the next round of payback for the Covenant. The UNSC Defense Forces of Zagosa Prime had pushed them back before, and I was sure tonight I'd get to join in that fight for the first time.

I stood up to move forward.

Zagosa Prime's only natural satellite appeared now as a crescent high above and the clouds were squalled. Intermittent periods of moonlight ebbed and flowed through the wisps high above.

I scanned for the Spartanâ€”at the head of formation. A duffle bag was slung over her torso, bulging with the mass of weaponry within. I doubt I could carry half of what she currently burdened through the thick undergrowth surrounding us.

Lima Company assumed the wedge-attack, the unit's preferred offensive orientation: an equilateral triangle capable of unthinkable mayhem.

I was auto-assigned to the left flank, about equidistant from the

rear corner and the point. I bolted to that position and took stock of the surrounding jungle, intent to focus. I not only covered fore, but left as well. Visibility was merely fifteen meters, twenty with my the aid of optics. The coal that lined the layers my battle dress absorbed body odor. Jackals were incredibly aware of their surroundings, able to exploit the environment against their enemies as much as they were to aid themselves. It was unallowable to be sniffed out before they saw you. It resulted in near-instant death.

My eyes darted to the lower-left HUD-quadrant, my bio monitor. Only slightly elevated heart rate. Normal respiratory rate. I queued a refresh command and watched the graphs recalibrate while marching forward in sync with Amy's tempo. My eyes widened in the darkness as I swept my rifle to the left, scanning. I high-stepped stones and logs and twigs, scanning to the right. Lima Company treaded lightlyâ€”the wrong move was usually your last.

I scanned up and down a tree just a few strides in front, to the left again, back to the front.

The distant bombardment grew steadily louder. The artillery batteries were likely in place only to deny UNSC aircraft their well-planned sorties. Amy flashed a red light over the net. She flashed another single pulse, then another. We stopped and every single combatant dropped to a crouch, then I started to pan the jungle expanse around me, looking so hard that I almost wished I had a target in sightâ€”something to annihilate. Nothing.

She came over the comm., "Sergeant, there's a snag ahead."

"Go." the Gunny replied.

"A rock wall thirty meters out."

"Do you suspect snipers? Ambush?"

"It's an ideal spot for it."

"Roger. Good work."

I was amazed. Amy could see thirty meters in this shit. Her assessment mirrored my instinctâ€”trouble was just around the corner. We relied on Gunny Smith's experience and cunning to get us through the looming obstacle.

He managed to get a plan of action going quickly.

"Holmes. Recon. Go."

A caption appeared above an amber diamond in my HUD. It read: CORPORAL HOLMES, BLAKE | AR-60. The words hovered over the bright icon as it moved from dead center of the pack towards the front, near the Spartan. I watched this play in my HUD as I tried to track the real thing with my other eye.

I saw the dot stop right on top of the one at the apexâ€”Amy. It stayed there for a nearly thirty seconds. They were speaking. Maybe she was coaching, formulating a plan on-the-fly. I scanned the trees to my left again.

I saw the icon move. I looked forward. Holmes began to advance, alone. With another twenty meters to the rocky embankment, he slowed his step, approaching ever so cautious. Lima Company watched and waited patiently, uneasily. Hopefully, he'd be the bearer of good news; there wouldn't be an enemy patrol or the suspected ambush waiting to ensnare. But it was foolish to let a thing like hope matter more in such a hopeless age. The Covenant were momentum in their drive to annihilate anything human.

He placed his back on the cool, wet stone, I imagined, as his bright icon shifted slightly. The massive, stony chunk towered high above him. He waited, perhaps stealing a breath, steeling himself.

A moment later and he must've peered his head around the edge. I saw an ever so slight movement of his icon—a sliver—a sidestep to the right. He jockeyed his weight over a jagged stone beneath his boots. A better view around the bulwark was all he required. He froze and his body tensed. Like lightning, a thin, purple lance shot out from somewhere in the darkness further beyond. Another shot was placed and terminated into the dirt fifty or more meters aft of him. His vitals flared. Silent alarms flashed all over my HUD. Something happened.

Then, two quick bursts from a human rifle exploded in the forest and rang out everywhere..._cu-cu-klak...cu-cu-klak._ Twin echoes followed in report.

"Hostiles neutralized." a feminine voice said. "Jackal sniper-scout pair." she added. "Minor lacerations to troop twelve's ulna. Someone should patch him up before he loses too much blood. Do it quick. No further contacts registering, but I don't know if anything else out there heard that."

I suddenly realized it was Amy talking, the same smooth, feminine voice that comforted me and somehow steeled me at the same time.

I searched for her waypoint. She had moved...far. I was too captive on Holmes to notice at first. Amy was a good forty meters from where she originally was.

A medic met Holmes once he attained cover again. Up against the slope of the rocky wall, Holmes laid out his forearm while treatment was administered. The entire unit took up covering positions all the while, slowly contracting towards the center of formation.

I could see him clearer as I neared. He breathed in a painkiller inhalant. He was quiet through the entire ordeal, even when he took the blow of the energy beam. Five minutes was all we owed to the incursion. I wondered how much element of surprise we had remaining.

Amy sent us further. She hastened the pace, led us into a half-sprint.

Now, the adrenaline that once reigned my bloodstream was beginning to dwindle. We passed the rock where Holmes almost lost his life, a puddle of human blood where the sniper beam struck. Lima Company trotted along in single file down a river bank with steep flanks, Pawnee seedlings lining the slopes on either side. The baby trees

could have provided ample cover for friendlies and enemies alike.

The stream snaked hard-right and almost instantly disappeared into the darkness mere footsteps away. The steep slopes leveled out to flatness. We emerged at a clearing. Far at the end was another curtain of forest. The field we now faced was incongruous to our strategy. Pale wheat grass and clay reflected everything. The moon seemed to bathe the land in perpetual illumination. We all thought the same thing as Amy threw up a fist.

Every Marine had glanced at one another during the pause. Any stealth we still possessed would be announced as soon as we stepped foot onto that field. It was the perfect kill zone. Covenant war parties could be anywhere in the trees bordering the plain. Embedded IR sensors in my HUD could not receive emissions past a hundred meters. Too much distance for thermals to reach me undistorted.

But there was utterly no choice. We had to cross. The objective was no where but ahead.

Gunny Smith chimed in. "Spartan Oh-seven-one, how high is that grass?"

"Just shy of a meter."

Once again, sound advice coming from the veteran. "We low crawl." he ordered.

We dropped to our stomachs.

I slithered as fast as I could atop the dirt.

It always seemed when you were suddenly faced with new challenges, you often overlooked the simple solution, assuming every obstacle was insurmountable. As I pumped my muscles, I began to think things weren't as bad as they once seemed. It was human nature to prepare one's self for the worst, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing given certain circumstances. These weren't the right circumstances, though.

We must've slinked along in the dirt for a mile, or so it felt. My body became sluggish. My abdominal muscles were on fire and growing unresponsive. I didn't have the heart to look up and gauge the distance remaining.

I stopped for a moment wondering when the pain would subside enough to carry on again. I checked my HUD. The formation had scattered, a third of it in front and the remainder scattered throughout. Both Amy and the Gunny tolerated it by indication of their silence. Different humans had different capabilities. I took two more breaths and crawled some more.

A flock of birds passed by me overhead, a swarm of black blotting out the stars. The flock scattered, split apart and each member pursued vectors of their own.

Two or three chose a spot a few meters ahead of my position and landed in the dirt. There was a flash of light. A shockwave. A gentle ringing in my ears. Cataclysmic detonation flew over my

head.

White.

I lied there in peace and quiet. My vision remained blank. I knew perfectly well what happened, but something took a hold of me, overriding all thoughts. It was possible I still possessed the will to stand, but it seemed easier to linger, to sleep.

Then there was nothing.

* * *

><p>I woke up, somehow. My eyelids flickered and my cheek muscles quivered as I tried to open my eyes.<p>

I was sprawled out on my back, lying in a field. Tall grass swayed gently all around me. The wind was calm. The night sky was clear. No more cloud cover. The air was cool and brisk. Starlight reached my eyes as I looked around.

There were people all around me. Their silhouettes wore concern.

More focus now. The weren't merely shadows in the moonlight. The clothes they wore were black.

Black, with subtle stripes. Like tigers, their shapes shifted when moving between blades of grass, closer to me. Clearer and clearer, the haze in the air roils away.

Black uniforms with matching helmets, rifles in their grasp.

Faces materialize. I recognize them all.

I felt no fear as I spoke.

"Mine?"

"Yes." a smooth, tender voice replied. It was Amy and she rested a hand on my shoulder, firmly urging me to lie down. "You're in shock. We're taking care of you."

"Roger that!" I said jokingly. It hurt to smile. "How many birds' lives did I cut short tonight?"

"We're giving you a stimulant and we're checking for concussions. Lie still."

I breathed in an inhalant pack and I immediately felt alert again.

"You're very lucky that mine hadn't been closer to you."

The memory of the blast came back to me. "Well, any more of them lying around? I'd prefer not to experience that again. Especially in the same night."

Haze placed a hand on my shoulder as I sat up. "We found the other mines while you dozed off. Thanks for being the guinea pig, by the

way."

"You bet. Anytime."

I stood up and took stock of the situation. There was now a hole a half-dozen meters in diameter where I might've crawled. The crater was at least two meters deep. The area around the blast was black with soot. Deep inside were feathers and bones.

"Son of a bitch." I looked ahead and saw some other Marines already at the forest's edge, peering inward.

Amy glanced that way, suggesting the urgency of our situation. "Can you walk?" she asked.

"I'm ready."

"Move out." she broadcasted.

A few more steps and I crossed into the next woods. Not as dense, this forest was more easily navigable. It was a clearer shot to our objective—"about three clicks out, I could see pulses of light far ahead between trees.

The Covenant artillery fire was more pronounced now. Though a mortal danger to everything in its path, I was comforted by the constant pounding—"a mask over the mine I activated. Any enemy presence ahead was oblivious to our imminent approach.

"Heads up, everyone." came the Gunny over the net. "We're closer to the Covvie emplacements. We have a small directive from Command before we continue with the mission. Alpha priority is now the enemy artillery. We're gonna take those things down so reinforcements can land at Foreclay. Wait for my command when we attain visual. Stay frosty. We're not outta this yet."

Lima Company intuitively resumed Delta formation and I took up position at the left flank once again.

I swept up and down. I combed the landscape left and right with my rifle—"nothing yet.

I continued the motions as we paced through at a jog. The moonlight was a pale prismatic ray as it brushed through the treetops. A subtle breeze whisked through the leaves and livened the woods.

Amy flashed an amber light. _Stay cautious._

I'm already cautious.

In my training days, I was instructed to interpret a single amber ping as the point man feeling something. It was a silly thing, classmates always said during breaks. And I don't know why I remembered that piece of the day's lesson so long ago, but as I observed the rest of Lima I knew the lesson was not forgotten by anyone here. They all settled into a walk and hardened their stances, peering as hard as they could into the night. They held their weapons closer, tighter. It was just a feeling from Amy, but it was to be treated as legitimate cause for concern.

We walked slowly, purposefully. For some reason, I froze. I hadn't even known why, it just happened out of pure instinct.

There was a tree in front of me, but it was unusual.

It was devoid of any branches. Something about it was simply wrong, just a thick, bare stalk, save for the extreme crown high above. The trunk was completely bare except for twin branches that grew downward rather than up. It was unnatural to me. Since the days of Darwin, it was common knowledge that limbs grew upwards so that photosynthesizing leaves could gain greater access to sunlight. I had never seen or heard of anything like this. At first, I mistook them for damaged limbs, which would justify Amy's hunchâ€”signs of an earlier battle.

But it would seem as though someone had deliberately destroyed the branches of this tree in front of me and chose not to finish the job. It made no sense. But I began to understandâ€”they weren't branches. I was frozen, now in fear for my life.

I was unable to move, paralyzed at the realization in front. Every hair on my statue-like body was raised. A surge of adrenaline nearly choked me.

A Covenant Elite, its back rested up against this tree.

A single sound, a single rustle of leaves beneath my feet and I was dead.

I tried to regain bearings. I tried to discern its color, know what I was up against. Before I could signal for help...

The HUD bathed my eyes in five milliseconds of blue light, just enough to catch my attention. It was Spartan 071. I heard a whisper in my ear.

"It's a blue. Sangheili Minor. It doesn't sense you. You'd be dead by now if it did."

I stole a slow, steady breath.

"I think it's just resting." she said.

"Umm, what's the prognosis?"

"I don't detect any EM coming from that direction so its shield must not be powered up. Grab your knife and go straight for the jugular."

"You're crazy."

"These things rarely rest. Do it now or you're dead."

You do it.

My fight or flight sense kicked in, and it was to backpedal in silence. But that was utterly impossible. I would surely give myself away. As I took another moment of thought, I knew she was right. It was a miracle I hadn't been lying on the ground in a pool of my own blood already.

I unsheathed my combat knife, slowly, silently. It glinted in the moonlight as it ascended my waist.

I brought the serrated side inwards, the ideal position to mangle a throat from behind. Maximum damage for a quick and painful kill.

I looked around me as I prepared. I envisioned the kill and my blood warmed. The alien in front was raw power and represented the pure hatred of one species toward another. Under the most primitive weapon the galaxy ever knew, the Elite would falter for merely a second, and that's all I would get. Kill or be killed.

I held my breath and crept forward.

I positioned the knife. The tip of the blade was at the extent of my reach, facing inward. The Elite towered over me. It did not seem possible I could kill this beast. But I began to brace my weight against the tree it rested on, careful not to touch anything else.

I inched the knife around the girth of the stalk, the weapon in my hand now hovered over its windpipe.

I inhaled a breath so slow, so quiet, the skin over my face began to cool.

"Take it out." the Spartan said.

I closed my eyes.

The adrenaline in me exploded. Without conscience, I hammered the point of the blade deep into delicate flesh.

The first thing it did was clutch my hands with its own. The grip had power beyond my imagining. Its paws were like vice grips, like metal on flesh. My knuckles began to swell as I held onto the blade. It twitched and jerked in my grasp and unleashed the most hellacious roar in all of the valley.

It tried to wrest itself free from the grasp of my two arms, thrashing side to side. My forearms pounded against the tree trunk as it oscillated, then it started to shriek when I began twisting the blade. Its gyrations grew far more violent as it felt the possibility of life slipping away. I wrapped my free arm around its torso, held it there by instinct. Pure killer instinct I had never possessed.

I sent my other hand over the knife, dragged the length of the submerged blade to the right, to the left, severing its alien vocal chords with all my might harnessed into the hilt.

It then merely gurgled and thick fluid drained over my palms. Suddenly, its whole body went limp and fell to the dirt in a heap. It instantly succumbed to hypoxia. The alien alveoli were saturated with Carbon-Dioxide and its own bluish gore. Its entire body shuddered violently for a full six seconds, and then silence. Stillness.

I stood over my kill, motionless, in awe. The throbbing in my hand subsided just as the alien's life had.

I had killed before. Not like this.

I breathed heavily for two minutes. Lima Company's presence evaded me for that time.

I looked up once the adrenaline-burst left me completely. I felt a drain. My hands swelled from within. The Marines gazed at me, my kill. A splinter of remorse stung slightly. But logic soon overruled. The Covenant would always be the enemyâ€”always. They started this War. We wouldn't stop ours.

I snapped out of it as a green light flashed in my HUD.

I inspected my knife and wiped the alien blood onto one of my pant legs. I stepped over the body, forcing myself not to look back as I moved on.

* * *

><p>The raging of the anti-aircraft artillery fire was now deafening. I could see one battery up ahead in the middle of a wide clearing.<p>

Just a broad platform with three, stout legs. Atop the platform was a station designed for a small occupant to maintain, a Covenant Grunt. A slew of glowing fire controls lit it up like a fusion coil. The whole weapon system had a unique auto-loading mechanism that absorbed huge rounds of ammunition stacked on the ground below it. Like clockwork, rounds raced into the sky, bursting into brilliant white-green spheres of energy. Air was displaced and starlight distorted in the wake of their detonation.

"Heads up," said the Gunny, "we've got four gun emplacements dead ahead, hundred-meter spread, twenty-five meter interval. I've selected two snipers to take out the two Elite guards to the extreme right. Everyone else, stay put and scan for hostiles. Pick the remaining targets amongst yourselves. All teams: fire your weapons at the same time the guns discharge in order to minimize presence. Once the guards are neutralized, rocket jockeys will take out the guns. Immediately after, we high tail it straight to the friendlies at Foreclay and to our final objective. Get to it. Out."

The elements crept into their positions. I moseyed up and further to the left, scanning for enemy infantry along the way.

I found myself in position at the threshold to the field and found a comfortable niche at the edge of the treeline. I scoped inâ€”I was within a reasonable shooting distance to my targetsâ€”two jackals at two hundred meters out. They provided cover for a Covenant grunt operating one of the guns. I studied my targets as much as I could. If they had patterns, I'd become an instant expert at them.

One jackal carried a Covenant particle beam rifleâ€”standard issue sniper gear. The other clutched a plasma pistol tight in its clawed extremity. The pulsating green light from the gun cast a haunted glow on the lower contours of its bird-like face.

The guns sounded off, rhythmically and forcefully. The grounds shook even this far away. One jackal craned its neck higher in the air, sniffing, tracing a scent. I knew my suit attenuated the odor I was no doubt producing by now. The alien placed its attention back to its

weaponâ€”inspecting it, calibrating some sort of backlit knob on the grip. The other was oblivious as it issued orders to the little one operating the gun, an opportune time for our strike.

The Gunny blared "Fire at will!"

The AAA guns recharged, loaded, and surged to life. Each battery glowed from within and sequentially prepared to fire.

Four thunderclaps rumbled. All of Lima Company fired in unison. Eight Jackals and two Elites unceremoniously fell over from what would seem nothing at all.

The grunts operating the machines had no idea what just happened as they prepared for another salvo. Then, four warheads riding on supersonic plumes of white propellant sailed through the night towards their places of business. Four seconds elapsed and they slammed into the Covenant quartet of artillery and reduced them to twisted metal and sparks once the smoke cleared. All that remained were fountains of multi-colored flame as we rose from our position.

We sprinted through the field as one. After a faint amount of breath and sweat, we reached a shallow precipice that overlooked a deep valley below.

"Ah, the sweet sound of silence." I said wholeheartedly.

"You mean the sweet sound of violence." Haze replied, returning a snicker.

All of Lima Company could see the main structure of the mining facility, lying about two clicks out in a shallow basin. Ethereal gunfire echoed off the valley walls. Columns of tracer rounds flew away in slow motion from the facility at the North side where the biggest concentration of Covenant forces were. And it was bad.

The Covenant could completely surround the entire outpost if they desired. Unbeknownst why, the enemy masses only preferred to seige the North. Diminutive small arms fire from the facility did what it could against the massive Covenant mechanized force that dominated the landscape. To the East, West and South, the aftermath of recent skirmishes was present: many Marines and human civilians lied motionless. But our collective hearts sunk as streams of more anti-aircraft artillery raced skyward in the midst of the Northern occupation.

One by one, we broke into an all-out sprint, Amy forcing herself not to break away from the pack.

Scattered and driven by haste, Marines came within a furlong of the Southern entrance, a well-cordoned off maintenance yard. Large crates even vehicles surrounded the main bay doors in a horseshoe fashion. While the barricades provided ample cover for those behind them, it was obvious UNSC Defense Forces had little-to-no time to prepare for this attack.

The Gunny began to radio the station. We willed our legs to pump just a little harder, a little faster.

The formation was now a loose gaggle. Elements of Covenant patrols materialized to left and right, vacating their cover. Not a single one of us went unnoticed as we raced down the hill and toward the Southern entrance. Alien limbs waved on other comrades to engage Lima Company.

We were dead in minutes.

The doors to the facility didn't open despite the Gunny's unrelenting hailing, even as he ran full tilt. Less than a minute and we were overrun.

Sweat and pain and fear drowed out my vision. A small personnel door adjacent to the main bay doors opened and a slice of light poured out into the dirt, a figure inside outlined. No uniform on, an elderly civilian dressed in plain clothes. The door was held open despite the danger and its only occupant waved us on frantically.

Barks and rabid screams poured into the basin from East and West, inexorably closing in.

Not paying any mind to the intense lactic acid I felt coursing through my legs, I ran my hardest dead on into the building, seemingly no way of slowing down what I set into motion. Within spitting distance, we began to pour through the door single file as only such an entrance permitted.

We pushed and we shoved one another through, mindful not to induce a trample. Hordes of Jackal and Grunt and Elite scurried in our direction from both sides further aft, merging to a point the closer they got. I wasn't the last in line, but I was still outside. The parting of air behind our heads and a warming sensation only meant plasma weaponry was discharged upon us with high accuracy. I stammered through the threshold and prayed for those behind.

The last Marine was almost indoors, then lost footing. The Marine got hit square in the back right between the shoulder blades. Air spewed out of his lungs with a yelp. He involuntarily lurched forward into the facility.

Amy appeared last and slammed the door behind her, static electricity crackling all over her body.

"Look out!"

The voice cried out from somewhere else...inside. Just as our collective eyes looked in that direction, a speeding forklift emerged and nearly ran the entire company over.

The narrow hallway we arrived at had barely the room to accomodate the forklift. It blitzed through, barely missing Marines as they slammed their backs to either wall. Its velocity was unnerving as it sped straight towards the South door, carrying a giant steel container on its forks.

Amy yanked the injured private off the floor a nanosecond before the forklift claimed them both. The load flew by and was practically right on top of the outer door when it locked up its brake rotors and screeched to a halt just short of it. The tines dropped to the floor with a _clang!_ The cargo slammed down with a chest-rattling

echo.

Amidst molten rubber streaks in the floor, the forklift reared backwards. Muffled thumps came from outside not even an instant later as the furious horde opened the door only to have it halted by the container. Just as well, the smell of burnt metal and ozone was their reply as they fired every plasma weapon they had. The burning smell wafted through the door seems. All the steel glowed a dull-red. I could hear the individual trigger pulses outside quickening, the Southern contingent hoping they could simply melt their way in.

The forklift driver then took action again, not tolerating any risk. He set the twin lifting forks at waist height and again the engine screamed to life. He sped forward and smashed into the container, jamming it further against the framework. He left the forklift there and yanked on a parking brake.

Sparks and screams and howling was all that remained, all heavily doped with rage. The forklift's engine then sputtered down.

The pandemonium outside gradually diminished and gave way to gentle moans and frustrated wailing. We were convinced there was no chance of them breaking through. We thusly slumped to the ground and gasped for new breath. Amy stood facing the freight that braced the doorway. She remained that way until the enemy lost faith, grew silent and sauntered away.

Gold rings of light encircled her body, ascending from the ground up like a rising spirit took up residence inside her colossal suit of armor.

Strangely, the sight was beautiful.

4. The Foreclay Outpost

****The Foreclay Outpost****

I lay there on my side, panting heavily. Most of Lima Company was much the same, temporarily immobilized and recuperating. My legs were no longer on fire, but they tingled all over with the sensation of a thousand fire ants living inside. My feet were of little use in my current state, numb. My arm was beginning to feel that way too as I rested on it. Fresh rubber lay in streaks right in front of me where the forklift struggled to stop. I checked the dimensions of the load it dropped at the face of the door and it was wide enough. Relief washed over me even as the steam and smell of ozone poured outward from where the massive freight met the door jams.

I looked around the long corridor that barely accommodated the giant forklift and skimmed over the faces and uniforms. Everyone was here. No one among the Company got left behind. One of the guys I hadn't met yet was on his face, though, with a colored patch of steam rising from his upper back. It was the young man pierced by Covenant energy weaponryâ€”probably a plasma pistol. One of the medics was able to assess his condition while I looked up the hallway. The civilian forklift operator remained in the driver's seat and was slumped forward, head resting in his armsâ€”folded atop the steering wheel. He sluggishly dismounted the exposed cab, looking like he'd seen happier days.

Everyone slowly got up one by one, checking for injuries, brushing off dust. Some had already begun personal inventory.

I then looked for her. She was still standing, almost right behind the hulking steel container that kept the enemy forces at bay. She remained stationary, eyes ever glued to the doorway as she spoke up.

"Is this what you've been using as a barricade all along?"

There was no answer for a few seconds, then the man dressed in blue maintenance coveralls stained with grease and blood pushed himself up and out of the forklift a few paces behind her and approached the Spartan's side. "Yes, it's the best we could think ofâ€|ma'am." His eyes widened as he just realized he addressed a female. The motion to rear back was written all over him. He found it hard to remain where he stood, but there he remained, petrified.

He slowly turned around and walked back down the corridor, snatching the hat off his head, pressing it to his chest and shaking his head.

"Hey." Amy called out, wheeling around to face him.

The man stopped in his tracks and turned. "Yes?"

"It's a fine idea. Good job. I am Spartan Oh-seven-one. You may call me Amy. What is your name?"

"Name's Hal. Hal Overton. Mighty pleased to meet you." He rushed over to her and held out a hand, almost regretting he did. But he wasn't greeted with the bone-shattering grip he might've expected. She was quite gentle and perceptive of his limits.

"How's the rest of your facility? Is the structure at all damaged? Are all entry points intact?"

"Yes they're all intact and holding. Those Covy peckers are gettin' through no way no how!" He quickly gestured to the container, saying, "We've managed to seal or block all access points with setups like this, but I don't know how long the Omega Wing will hold out. There's just too much Covenant trying to get in over there."

"Where is Omega Wing?"

"It's due North and slightly West of here, where all the action is. Just follow the signs overhead."

The Gunny approached the two and listened as intently as he could, checking himself for embeded needler shards. "That must be the North side." he chimed in. Gunny pulled out his rifle, checked the ammo count, then unholstered his sidearm to insert a fresh clip. "Everyone check yourselves for needler microfragments and check your gear. Make sure your shit's ready to move out."

Hal grabbed the suspenders of his coveralls and faced the Gunny in vexation. "What do you plan to do, Sergeant?"

Gunny Smith raised a brow, looked at Amy and walked off.

Amy saw the Gunny off with a sidelong glance down the hall, then placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "We're taking back this mining station. We're moving up to the North side where we will push back the enemy far enough for an air assault to effectively eradicate the Covenant contingent." She looked on towards the Gunny, Hal unable to gauge her face, and marched down the corridor.

Hal swallowed and stared at her as she leisurely paced away.

Haze got up and moved towards Hal with that antagonizing smile on his face. "Don't worry, she just tries to look like a hard-ass in front of everyone. But I'd recommend making sure that the parking break is engaged. If that door opens, she's gonna have someone's nuts in a ringer, ya know?"

Hal hurriedly entered the forklift and did as Haze said. The humorous Private winked at me and followed the rest of the pack down the hall. I was the last to leave.

A couple of NCOs hefted the injured Private with his arms draped over their shoulders. I hoped the young man would make it out of this mission alive. A single bolt of plasma had the ability to melt its way right through standard-issue armor as well as layers of flesh beneath it. Though I couldn't believe I made it unscathed myself, I didn't have the gaul to wait around and ponder it.

The walls were a thin white styrocreteâ€”just durable enough to prevent someone from crashing through it if they lost balanceâ€”or if they dove into one running from a hot Covenant pursuit. I hoped the outsides of the facility weren't as frail as the insides. But this was an industrial complex. I knew that places such as these had to comply with certain building codes. With any luck, the superstructure was solid steel and the outer surfaces were concrete reinforced with some good 'ol titanium-A to ward off our enemies. But it seemed as if the Covenant wasn't trying to level the place. They certainly had the capability with the force held at the North side. Something told me they would've done it already. Something at Zagosa Prime piqued their interest. Something unbeknownst to Lima Company and to HQ. It was why they've accepted such a beating from Zagosa forces and kept asking for more. We'd happily keep dishing it out.

We approached a T-junction at the end of the hall. Hovering overhead were two brown signsâ€”left leading to Operations/Maintenance/Admin/Gamma/Omega and the right leading to Med-lab/Infirmary/Storage/Dining Hall/Gymnasium.

As we approached, Amy nodded towards the right and the two NCOs dragged the injured private towards the medical facilities with one combat medic in tow.

The rest of us veered to the left towards the Omega Wing.

The Gunny stopped. "We're making a quick stop at Admin. We're getting a copy of the blueprints on this place so we know a little something of the battlefield. We may be holed up here for a while until we're able to provide Air Staff with a feasible strike parameters. So fire team Foxtrot and fire team Zulu: you will accompany Amy to admin while myself and fire teams Gamma and Quebec head on to the North side."

I thought it was a risky move—splitting Lima in half. But it seemed a necessity. Granted, we needed to fend off the Covenant at the Omega Wing, but we'd need those blueprints if we wanted to keep the advantage over our enemies. I knew Lima to be capable at holding back Covenant forces, but I would never rule out the possibility that the alien bastards could win in a ground engagement. This was a brigade we were now dealing with. There was still a chance that they'd overrun the combat personnel at Omega Wing and push deeper into the facility. We needed to keep the high ground in case that happened. We needed the blueprints for Intel. So much depended on fire teams Foxtrot and Zulu getting to Admin and acquiring those schematics.

It was a double-edged sword: damned if we did, damned if we didn't.

Such is the life of a spec ops Marine.

We set off on our way. The halls we entered began to feel like a rat maze. Long and narrow corridors went on and on with office doors stemming off from them. A junction here, a junction there. Only ninety-degree bends adjoined them, blind corners perfect for swift ambushes. Had any Covenant already infiltrated the complex? I doubt anyone knew. And the ceiling was obtusely low. I wasn't a claustrophobic, but I just might see the other side of myself if I was cooped up in here too long. The whole path we tread was way too bright with intense fluorescent light. "I'd like to hit the architect of this place with one of their ceiling tiles." I said.

"Good luck." Haze replied. "The architect is probably long gone. This place is pretty old. Thought someone like you would know that."

I checked my canteen and was satisfied with the drinking water I had remaining. It was probable now that it would be in short supply going forward, for after a quick stop at the Admin sector for blueprints we were headed to the thick of battle. That much was certain.

Off one of these paths was Admin.

Navigating the forests earlier seemed a much easier task. Marching cautiously down some narrow hall only to come to an intersection adjoining it to another, the navigation had no end in sight. A seemingly unattainable destination. Needle in a haystack, they used to say. The view ahead was terribly limited, changing abruptly too often. Counter-intuitive as it was, I felt safer in the jungles outside, amidst camouflaging trees and the cover of night. It was comforting in a way, with the sweat and the breeze and the heartbeat between my ears, the wildlife and moonlight.

Lima Company was still together, though. Besides the four currently seeking the medical wing, we had a common direction, though once we reached Admin all would change again. We'd split up and half the unit would take on the Covenant insurgents at the North side. It was risky, though any course of action was a double-edged sword. We could head there together and meet our enemy with full strength, albeit underequipped in the grand scheme if we were overrun with no OPSEC on our own turf. Intel was sorely needed within these damned halls if the battle ever found its way here.

As we meandered forth through this maze, still as a single unit, I

issued a silent prayer for the two platoon-sized advance teams. I was more and more of the belief that none of us would know how much more time this hunt for intel would siphon from our mission. How much time would the remaining teams need to search for blueprints while Gamma and Quebec battled? I held these questions as I once again looked ahead to the Gunnery Sergeant, the calmest and coolest NCOIC I ever knew.

We were halted by the Gunny. "Someone radio Foreclay personnel at Omega Wing and let them know we're en route."

"I got it." I said, accessing my LMR.

Upon radiating, I was instantly rewarded with about 30dB of harsh reverb. I viewed an in-built spectrum analyzer and saw the noise floor surpassed the center frequency I was transmitting on. There was too much backscatter from the structure itself.

"Sarge, there's too much passive interference. Must be more steel and concrete here than we thought. I'm going to try and patch into a building network."

"Roger that, Private. Do what you can and keep me in the loop."

"Affirm." I took a few more steps down the hall until I came across an OM5 fiber conduit. Soldiers passed me by slowly as I pulled out an old RJ-90 cable from my rucksack. I plugged the connector into the wall outlet and patched the other end it into my HUD. A handshake protocol, a layered OSI structure registered on my HUD's emulator application, and next I read that a link was establishedâ€"something on the T-band at about 2.9 THz. I nestled the incoming frequency in between a pair of generously-spaced guard bands, and sent it straight through to the Gunny on an encrypted link (just like I was trained). "Sarge, you're live."

"Good work, Shakespeare."

Rather than hold a private conversation and explain to us later, the Gunny shunted his conversation straight to TEAMCOM.

"This is Lima Company QRF of the UNSC Special Operations Defense Forces Zagosa. We are en route to Omega Wing. What is your status?"

Static and a disembodied voice came back, all warbled and fuzzy. "_This is Sierra Company_. _We are experiencing heavy casualties! We need immediate assistance and MEDEVAC. The cordons are being breached. Too..many_â€|"

The channel became shrouded in noise.

The Gunny shouted over TEAMCOM, "Alright! Double time it! Go!"

The company broke out into a sprint, sliding around right-angle turns at the end of corridors and blowing by their accompanying signs overhead. Left-right-right-left-right-leftâ€|It went on and on, until finally after two minutes of full-tilt running we arrived. Off to the left of the hall were wide double doors made half of Plexiglas from the waist up. We stammered through and frantically made out several

offices, all of which could contain what we were looking for.

"Change of plans, everyone." the Gunny announced. "I'm staying at Admin and Amy is going to the Omega Wing. Fire teams Gamma and Quebec, hit the North hard and give 'em hell! Amy's in command. We'll be right behind you."

A series of acknowledging clicks came over the net as they sped down the walkway and disappeared into another forsaken hall. I started to wonder what kind of plan Amy would execute out there. She'd be in command of everything at the North. Any doubts I had of her quickly vanished as I told myself she was a Spartan and...

"Shakespeare, check that office! Rios, check that one! Haze find any containers that can be searched! Everyone, start going through all the files and find me those blueprints!"

We all jumped to our tasks like we just got struck by lightning. Marines scoured through filing cabinets, desk drawers, and electronic logs, all frantically on the move in the tight confines of the cubicle-laden space.

"Shakespeare." Haze said.

"Yeah?"

"Do you know how to crack a safe?"

"You enter in the combo."

"Okay, smartass. Can you pick a lock?"

"Yeah." I said smiling as I made my way over to him. "Let's see what you got here. Okay, fairly old container. This is a Brigger Nine-Thousand. This is a top of the line safe, man!"

Haze's frown intensified.

"For its time, anyways." I grinned.

"C'mon, man. Stop fucking with me."

"How does it feel?" I smiled. "Okay, this should be easy." I pulled from my rucksack the standard lock-bumping kit. Straight Pick, Jagged Pick, graphite lubricant...and all I needed to supply then was a pair of steady hands. I sprayed the inside of the lock with the lube, then inserted both tools until I could feel the tumblers' vibrations through the picks held in my fingers. I finagled and finessed the picks up and down, until I heard a series of satisfying clicks. Once they were all in proper alignment, the picks laid into place with no effort required. With one smooth motion, I twisted the Jagged Pick one-eighty degrees clockwise while maintaining positive pressure against the casing with the Straight Pick, until the bolt fully receded.

"There ya go." I said. "See, you're not the only one with jokes."

I proceeded over to an unexploited area of the office, quickly hacking my way into an electronic log like a thief with an

addiction.

Haze laughed as he ransacked the antiquated security container I just opened.

"What?" the Gunny asked.

Haze picked his head up and looked at the Gunnery Sergeant with disdain.

"Look at us. We're trained killers doing office work for the Corps. This is not the kind of job I signed up for."

"Well, then hold on, princess, while I fetch you some capuccino." said the Gunny as he kicked over a desk. It slammed onto the ground, nearly missing the toe of another's boot.

"Capuccino is a morning drink, Sarge." Holmes stated matter-of-factly.

"Aw, who gives a shit. It's fucking caffeine and...damn I could really use some right about now."

"Shit," Rios chided, "we had no time for fancy-ass-drinks back when I was a PFC, Gunny."

"And how long ago was that, couple years? Hell, I've got _boots _older than you, kid."

After about five minutes of idle chit-chat while ravenously ransacking, Haze was finally the one to find our intel inside the hacked safe. He marched straight over to Gunny Smith and handed it over. "Sarge, do I get a pay raise or what?"

"If we both come out alive tonight, you'll get a three-day pass. Believe me."

We moved triple time as fast as our legs could carry us down the halls. Then, something unexpected triggered our training instincts once again. The lights went out. We froze and activated night vision. It seemed as though my heavy breath put a bull's-eye right on me as we assumed statuesque stances.

"What the hell just happened?" said the Gunny.

"Must've cut the power." Holmes replied.

"Nah, that's impossible." Haze countered. "This place has got to have some kind of redundant power grid. One goes off, another comes on. That's how these places operate. Thirty-two hours a day, seven days a week, and zero interruptions."

"How would you know that?"

"My Father was a miner. Check the blueprints if you don't believe me."

"Gunny has 'em, stupid."

"Check your files. I scanned them and uploaded them to

everyoneâ€¦stupid."

"Oh."

"A _five-day _pass." the Gunny cut in.

"Okay," Holmes announced, "Haze is right. Redundant power alright, but it's not coming on. Why?"

"Could they have knocked out _all _the power?" came the Gunny.

"No way in hell." Holmes asserted. "The facility has a _huge _grid with triple redundancy. One external plantâ€¦they _could_ get to that one. But even if they did, they'd have to get two othersâ€¦and they're both _inside_ the complex. One near Omega and one under us, powered by geothermal."

"So why am I seeing blackness?"

"Could be that the backup for this sector will only charge when there's thermal activity down below, I don't know."

"So then what about Omega Wing power plant? Would these sectors siphon off power in the event of a total loss?"

"No, Omega's juice is apparently only for Omega according to the schematics, and maybe that's why we just lost contact with them as well. They could have literally just knocked out Omega's power simultaneously. Now that I think about itâ€¦"

"They cut the power?!" Haze but in. "What do you mean _they_ cut the power? How can they cut the power, man? They're animals!"

"Radio over there and confirm that." the Gunny reasserted.

"Accessingâ€¦no signal. The wireless network runs off primary power. We need to get closer to the North side so we can hail them on Land Mobile Radio."

"Shit. Alright, we carry on to Omega. Formation Indigâ€¦"

"_Quiet..._" someone whispered. "Hear that?"

We all froze, everyone looking like green assassins in the blackness through my HUD. I held my breath and concentrated. Then, I heard it. Faint sounds. Metal clanging sounds, like a hammer against sheet metal. Like something in the vents.

"Gunny, we've got company in the vents!"

"Move! Move! Move!"

It was primal instinct.

I heard clanging all around, responding to our quickened footstepsâ€¦combat boots pounding into the floor with no etiquette. A green haze filled my blurred vision from my NV-tasked HUD. I struggled to look behind as I ran, wondering if the comrades behind

were in step with the ones in front.

"Where the Hell are they?!" someone screamed.

Fear overwhelmed my thoughts, forcing tunnel vision. I became my own fear, as if I turned into some reckless beast charging into the unknown darkness. The clanging grew louder, LOUDER. I almost lost my nerve while styrocrete buckled and broke all around us. Metal grates dropped from their duct seals and toppled to the deck. I heard barks and screams and howls so loud that it seemed to emanate from right beside me.

My insides were on fire, my adrenaline exploding throughout my weightless body as I plowed ahead at full steam.

I heard noise to the left, to the right, back and forward. Our enemies lived in the walls and surrounded us completely. Our only hope was to stampede right through them.

"Switch to shredders!" yelled the Gunny, running as fast as he could.

I desperately fumbled through my utility belt, trying to fish out a clip as I ran with a forty-pound burden strapped to my back. My search came up good and I swapped hollow-points for a full clip of tumbling-shredder rounds. I pulled back the charging rod and disengaged the safety.

"Fire at the vents!"

I could barely hear his voice under all the combined pandemonium of our heavy footsteps and Covenant ruckus. The Gunny must've been too shaken to key his command into TEAMCOM. But soon, it didn't matter. He fired and others followed. The hallway strobed with the shimmering flashes of our rifle muzzlesâ€"spitting out chaos and death. Showers of sparks bathed the confines of the narrow walkway as metal and chunks of wall blistered and flew apart. And the sick, horrific music of the Covenant war party was drowned out at each squeeze of the trigger.

We turned a corner. The sign pointed towards the Omega Wing. We ran toward it like demons, the howling and screaming diminishing only a faint amount. An office door to the side opened. From it, emerged a small simian creature with a mask over its face and a Covenant energy weapon in hand. I didn't instantly recognize which species it was. Combat reflexes took a hold of me and my trigger finger tensed. I poured whatever I could into it as I blasted by without a passing glance. There was a yelp. I couldn't see anything more. I heard the alien topple to the ground behind me with a wet _Ptoomp!_

I did my best to ensure those behind me wouldn't encounter it.

I could feel the wind rush past my face as I ran with all my might and endurance, but it was stronger than before, almost pushing against me. Accompanying the source of the draft was a faint glow not far ahead. The illumination gradually became so bright that I was forced to relinquish my night vision. I no longer had the upper hand. As we ran closer, the light was an irradiating glowâ€"so bright that I had to squint. I could no longer tell how far away it was. I just kept running closer to itâ€"with no idea what was at the

end.

Shadows danced across me—my comrades in front. My eyelids involuntarily shut, the light so bright. The glow pierced through my lids, embossing bluish-purple spots into my non-existent vision. I placed a hand out in front, out of air and sight and the will to press on, hoping to run into something. A friend. A Marine. Someone.

But there was nothing but empty air striking my chest.

Just then, at my last shred of faith and breath, a hand grabbed mine and pulled me inward with a jerk. The light faded and my vision cleared. It was Amy. Harsh golden light reflected off her opaque visor.

More and more troops made it through as I peered aft. The light still seared into the hall we emerged from, the corridor seeming to suck it all up. Blending with the darkness, hundreds of creatures swarmed and stumbled and stampeded over one another not far behind the last of Marines to cross over. The Covenant mob chanted something odd and horrid, but it was rhythmic. The shrieks and the wails overtly declared a frantic appetite for blood and pain and death, that much I knew.

The last of us made it through and Amy threw her half-ton MJOLNIR bulk into the heavy steel door. The off-color music faded into near silence as she leaned forward to press it into place. All the while, someone unbeknownst to us pushed past and began keying a sequence of numbers into a nearby electronic cipher lock.

"It's quite fine now. You can stand back. It's a class A vault door." the man in a white lab coat announced.

Not a second later, muffled thumps came from the other side.

We stood there and caught our breath again. I took a look around and felt relieved that we caught up with fire teams Gamma and Quebec. Lima was whole again, almost.

"You got here so quick." Amy said to Gunny Smith. "Did you locate the intel?"

"Yea, found it quicker than I thought we would, thanks to Pennington and Haze."

"Excellent work, Marines." she said. "I was just about to take Gamma and Quebec out there. Now that we're all here, let's wait a minute while you all catch your breath."

Gunny nodded, checked the condition of the doorway we'd just entered, then doubled over as Foxtrot and Zulu did the same.

It seemed this would be our story to tell, this running and hiding and praying for our chance to dig in. But not too far ahead was our true objective. The civilian in the white didn't look our way, but instead went immediately to eyeing a datapad in his hand, seemingly unperturbed by the ravenous alien horde just on the other side of the door. The thumping just beyond was unrelenting and actually getting louder. He raised a brow as he flipped through documents and

scratched his nose, mumbling something to himself.

Haze rose from his hunched-over stance and drew one deep breath. "Are you sure those bastards aren't just gonna pour through and rip out your damned lungs?!"

"Ah yes," the civilian replied, "I can see your cause for alarm, but it's quite alright now. You're in Omega Wing. It's heavily reinforced with adequate provisions. If you are settled now, you'll find amicable accommodations in one of our many break rooms. Would you like something to drink?"

"Hell-fuck-no! I wouldn't like something to drink! They're in the vents! We need to setup DFPs for when they bust in here!"

The scientist clenched his jaw and looked upon the rest of us with a body language that implied disappointment. "Do not worry. The HVAC for this wing is internally-routed through underground passages. If you choose not to believe me, ask your Spartan to back-brief you on the situation here. I'm going to be in the laboratory. If any of you require sustenance or medical attention, please visit the lounge on the third floor. I believe the med-lab is no longer a safe place."

"Fuck!" Haze hollered. "Dietz, Hawkings, Seltzin, and Richardson are still out there!"

"We'll get to them in time." the Gunny consoled. "They're four strong guns, five if the other heals fast enough. Right now," Smith faced the other man, "just tell us where the action is."

"The Quick Reaction Force is that way." he said, holding up an outstretched arm. "It's about three-hundred meters further North. Follow the signs to Shipping and Receiving. They are at the loading docks still trying to hold off the Covenant."

"Still?" The Gunny prepared to take off.

"They've had significant setbacks. No one anticipated this large of an offensive from the Covenant. But I have a feeling things will change for the better now that you're here." he said, staring at Amy.

"C'mon, everyone!" Gunnery Sergeant Smith shouted. "Let's get some fresh air and leave the civvies to their duties."

More like an air terminal than a mining entrance, couches and rows of seats filled much of the expanse and lined the walls. We followed our leader and exited the central lobby, ran down a slew of gently-sloped service ramps at the far side. Adjacent to the aisles were exposed freight lifts. Massive steel girders occupied the ambient high above, bounding downward at the periphery and buttressing the ceiling's weight into the deck. Forklifts and robotic loaders and other machinery took up most of the floor space near the dock in the distance. The disjointed rhythm of staccato gunfire barely resounded into the enormous chamber we sped through and was perceived as merely a series of muffled reports originating from the space somewhere beyond a massive doorway up ahead. We all hoped it wasn't too late as the reunited Lima Company whisked towards the action.

Finally, a set of massive double doors was the only thing that stood between us and our real mission. We could complete it.

Amy brought up behind Gunny Smith as he actuated the control for the doors to open.

5. The Northern Defensive

****The Northern Defensive****

The blast-grade doors slowly heaved themselves apart and the sound of combat became intensely apparent. Fresh rays from the early morning sun streamed in and surprised us at how much time had gone by. I was expecting a sudden transition from the calm interior of Omega Wing to the battle raging outside, but I didn't fathom anything like thisâ€¦

I actually felt small as I never had before. Past the loading docks, past the rows of pallets and boxes and trailers occupying the immediate area just outside the doors was an epic panorama of carnage. The courtyard was vast, sprawling outward for at least a whole kilometer by my estimation. Bodies were strewn everywhere beneath the canopy of a massive awning, which was half twisted and smoldering itself. The corrugated metal covering stretched out from where we were and ran the entire length of the bay to where it met the foot of the valley. There, where its cover stopped, the entirety of Covenant forces had convened.

Craters dominated those very plains outside the courtyard, undoubtedly the site of the initial bombardment prior to their advance. Tractors and forklifts and transport vehicles were on fire, toppled, and thick smoke billowed into a network of ashen ceiling-blankets clinging to the awning. Plasma bolts and grenades and needler rounds criss-crossed into the cavernous loading bay. Merely wild shots, but the sheer number of them all but guaranteed more UNSC losses. The friendlies were scattered and without cohesion as if they weren't communicating on the same channel; it was plainly evident that they were losing because of this fact. They were horrendously outnumbered and would not continue much longer.

"This is FUBAR." Haze whispered.

Something else grabbed a hold of our attention. A warthog roamed around the perimeter of the courtyard attempting to circumvent the enemy forces and dispense firepower. The more it roamed, the more the driver must've realized this was impossible. It was the enemy's only target for the time being. Instead of dispensing firepower, it was drawing it. They barely avoided enemy fire, weaving in between wooden pallets and plastic boxes as they shattered all around. Rare-earth metals spewed everywhere from within, catching the light of the day and glittering in report. The driver was wide-eyed and panicked, barely managing the all-terrain vehicle's torque. It slid recklessly around tight corners and lost precious seconds off its pass. If it stopped for an instant or even slowed too much, it would be destroyed in seconds. The passenger riding shotgun was slumped over, I couldn't discern their condition from this distance. The rear gunner jostled around in the rear bed, struggling to get an angle on any target. At least he was still alive and firing.

The sheet metal canopy overhead restricted our view from much of the Covenant force further beyond.

Amy's vision and armor systems enhanced her already acute senses and she radioed to everyone what she saw. "They've got plasma shades already set up along the sides, and what looks to be brigade-sized infantry out there, Gunny. I don't think this is another guerilla run. At this rate, we'll be overrun in a matter of minutes unless we pull a rabbit out of the hat."

"Roger. Any suggestions?"

"Let's join in and push back as much as we can and give those friendlies some breathing room. When we can push no more, we fall back into the safety of Omega Wing. Maybe we can catch them off guard and draw them in closer."

"But they'll keep coming."

"Exactly."

"Well, okay, I'm not sure where you're going with this."

"If we can lure the heavy hitters inward, we might have enough time to call in a strike package while they're not looking."

"That would depend on how much attention we can steal from them."

"Aye, Gunny."

He smiled. "Dangerous, but workable. I like it, Spartan."

"I've got a LASER in my duffle. Even if a strike package isn't possible, we just need to get a few of those mortar tanks in close enough and I can improve our odds. Just keep the infantry off my back when I call out code word Grindell."

"Need to get everything timed right." Smith cautioned. "These blast doors are tough, but they won't hold out forever against that kind of point-blank firepower. We can't afford to let any one of them get that close or our exit is compromised. And if they make it inside..."

"Leave that to me." The Spartan then turned to Gunny Smith. "I'll make sure they can't get that close. Remember what we did at New Constantinople?"

I didn't know what she meant, but he apparently did while nodding at her. He motioned for us to jump down and start digging in. Amy ran forward and disregarded the hydraulic lift, jumped down off the wide loading platform and into the courtyard below—a good two meters down. We mirrored the move and it was a fierce drop. I checked the ammo count displayed in my rifle's LCD, brushing my fingers at the spare magazines at my side. I brought the butt stock to my shoulder, pointed the barrel downrange, and scanned for hostiles. Scanned the maze of boxes. Out of drilled instinct, I pulled the trigger once when I saw that distinct silhouette pop out of cover.

One jackal-skirmisher down.

57 rounds still in the magâ€”plenty for this kind of work, though I knew there'd be many more of its kind lurking in shadows, wielding particle beam sniper rifles or overcharged plasma pistols to be let loose before they were detected. I looked further: enemies were surely nestled within the maze of the courtyard. It was the perfect hiding spot for Covenant assassins just like the skirmisher I put down. Far ahead, we had long-range targets, mostly triple A and heavy ordinance, mechanized forces. This was the worst battle I'd seen and so far I'd only fired a single shot. Like many others, I presumed, all my faith was vested in the Gunnery Sergeant and the Spartan.

I suddenly saw all the friendlies that had taken cover run towards us. Their IFF tags closed the distance. Amy must've hailed them and given them a real set of ordersâ€”something they could work with. And the Covenant forces produced their own reaction to her commands. The maneuver apparently made them reassess the strategy that netted favorable results thus far. The attack reached a brief ceasefire as we all pulled in close. Something worked. No more energy mortars decimated our allies in the far reaches with the sturdy metal awning overhead reaching out so far into enemy territory. There was no room for their artillery to arc towards us from above, not this far away without impacting the awning itself which seemed as though it could still hold a while longer. It was a networked mesh, somewhat elastic, the mass of it holding together with its adjoined segments transferring and absorbing damage rather than shattering into fragments.

We jockeyed for defensive positions and stole pot shots at the stragglers scattered about the ruined crates. Random thunder resounded off the hangar walls and steel support trusses as our snipers perched prone over the dock ledge above us chose which enemy's life expired, smoky fingers reaching out to touch an unsuspecting someone. Blurry bodies dropped in the distance, though the overall mass of the Covenant infantry was too far out and under decent cover for accuracy.

I stepped over to Holmes. "How's that arm?"

He gave a brisk nod and a thumbs up.

The last remaining Warthog came rushing towards us and skidded to a halt beside our formation. It seemed the other Hog earlier hadn't made it through, their fate unknown but surely speculated. I looked over towards this particular all-terrain vehicle and was rewarded with a liberating sight of a gauss turret. The Gunny immediately broke cover and jogged a few steps over to the vehicle and asked, "Who is your highest ranking?"

The driver responded, "I am. Staff Sergeant Steve Valvalaris. Orders, Gunny?"

"Line up as much fire as you can on heavy hitters, but don't put yourselves in danger. We're gonna need you to make it to the end with that turret. Offload your passenger and we'll take care of 'em."

Lima Company and the few remaining Marines of Sierra Company stood their ground and faced down the onslaught to come.

"Their mortars are useless in here," the Gunny announced in a tone that seemed to comfort as much as it emboldened, "So they won't be able to arc any rounds far enough in. Worry about their small arms fire first while rocket jockeys and the warthog take on the bigger threats. Oh-seven-one, can you confirm that their artillery is on the move?"

"That's a negative. They're going to stay put out there. They anticipate an air strike."

"Smart bastardsâ€|"

"Breaking ranks." Amy stated. "I'm flanking."

"Where do you think she's going?" I asked Holmes.

The Gunny replied, "God's speed, Spartan."

She picked up a green duffle bag from the floor and sped off, not looking back. We all watched her head into the gauntlet of boxes and pallets to the right and disappear into the shadows. I looked back at Gunny Smith. He had his head bent to the ground, biting his lower lip. I hoped they both made the right choice, whatever it was. As usual, the Spartan was off on her own again, alone. I could feel Lima Company grow a little smaller as I tried to concentrate downrange. The front lines of the Covenant were still a little too far away to get a good shot off. They appeared hesitant to re-engage after our re-group. I occasionally reported in a sighting: a green blur that slowly faded or the top of a jackal's shield cresting above a crate as it strafed out of sight. All we could do was wait until we had clear shots or until we could see what it was the Spartan planned to do.

I looked onward again. The sun was nearly at eye level, our massive hangar flooded wall to wall with its aura as well as thousands of Covenant.

Though I knew none of us would surrender merely at the sight of an enemy force so large and focused, I couldn't help but feel we were outnumbered and outgunned. They engulfed the whole complex, a Covenant bottle-neck forming at the entrance to the massive storage yard. Nearly the entire mass of them squeezed into each other, pressing and pushing to get inside. Echoing from beyond were the tell-tale thunderclaps of anti-aircraft artillery racing high into the sky. Their collective discharge prevented friendly air forces from carpet bombing the whole damned alien-infested valley. The sky was likely a kill zone for kilometers in every direction. That this Covenant force was still here only meant that space-based assets were offline as well for reasons unknown.

I looked over at Haze. He was frosty as the poles of Zagosa, though frosty was perhaps an inaccurate word for his particular appearance. Angryâ€"he was extremely angry as he stared down the Covenant mob inching into the cavernous bay just outside the Omega Wing fortress. He winced and glared so fiercely with anger that lipids formed on his cheeks, blister-red. I could see the four marooned members of Lima Company weighed heavily on his mind, but I began to sense something more as he glanced my way. He hated them just as muchâ€"if not moreâ€"than those who had experienced personal tragedy during the War. He wanted to make sure that these purple bastards paid the price

for what they'd done so far—the death and destruction laid unto Zagosa Prime and the human race. I would gladly join him no matter what the outcome.

Every rifle was raised. Every crosshair was fixed. Every Marine dead-set.

We were ready to complete our mission.

But this wasn't another Covenant sub-unit scattered about Zagosa on guerilla runs. Lima and other combat units had dealt with plenty of those before.

This was likely the entire expeditionary force. They had all gathered here. I took in the sight of the swarming mass, bustling and angry and extremely noisy as the din reached my ears from the other end of the yard. Surely, Command hadn't dispatched Lima Company to prosecute this battle alone; the enemy brigade had already routed Sierra Company. They were no longer a complete unit by CENTCOM's standards.

One and a half companies could not defeat this.

It made me wonder where Amy was.

Why did she volunteer? What did she volunteer for? Why did she go alone?

I focused and looked beyond again, anticipating the first salvo. Hopefully, I'd see her again if I made it to the end of this day.

I squinted through the crosshairs atop my rifle—still too fuzzy. The uglies barely filled in the reticule, plenty of space in between the sideposts. The sensation of recoil bursts and the sight of alien flesh imploding was soon to be delighted by all Marines.

They marched ever closer, hunched, tensed.

"Range?" called the Gunny.

"About seven-hundred meters, Sarge." a designated marksman called out. "Scattered out-targets at various distance as well."

"Snipers, keep firing at will." he returned.

I peered out into the distance toward the edges of the hangar bay. Far past our combat radius, Covenant engineers were mulling around the load-bearing support trusses, attempting to figure out how to disassemble the massive canopy section by section. It was feasible given enough time and they could take it down piece by piece if they wanted to, but I knew their Elite commanders would rather die charging us than win with precaution. Fortunately for us, Covenant Elites were more arrogant than the staunchest of Innies.

I stepped over to Holmes as thunderous cracks of sabot rounds left sniper barrels at supersonic speeds. Each shot stole my attention. Holmes assessed everything ahead and appeared distant much like the rest of Lima Company, much like Amy always was. Distant unlike the Covenant army breathing down our necks. They marched closer and closer, inch by inch, all inhabitants of the bay knowing that the

real battle was close at hand. Their alien craniums could now be seen over the lines of pallets and boxes. They were willing to sacrifice their own for a shot at the Omega Wing. And for what? What was here that was nowhere else?

Holmes never took his eyes off the incoming enemy as he said to me, "It looks like they've gathered here, Penn. All of them this time. I don't know if we can tackle something like _this_. What do you think? Can we push this back like other times?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I do know we won't wait long to find out. Don't worry, just don't let them get inside. Amy's got something planned."

The Gunny broadcasted into the net, "Listen up! If you see _anyone's_ _vitals_ flash a yellow, you immediately look where they're taking fire from and I want that corresponding fire team to double and triple up on the attacker. We made it all the way here. Let the only red to be seen today be our ammo counters. Give them _no__thing_ today!"

Green acknowledgement lights flashed in sequence.

The Gunny yelled at the top of his lungs, "Now, what is a Lima Company Marine?!"

And we responded with the unit's battle hymn, "_Sir, a Lima Company Marine is a highly motivated, truly dedicated, aim-high-never-die, rompin' stompin' Covenant-droppin' machineâ€|Hoo-rah!_"

"What?"

"_Hoo-rah!_"

"What?!"

"_HOO-RAH! HOO-RAH! HOO-RAH!_"

Our unshakable music saturated the cavernous bay with a rolling thunder, and I knew the enemy heard it over their own noise.

"You're God-damn right!" he shouted with eyes aglow like an apex predator. He turned towards the approaching front.

A thin, purple beam shot forth and struck someone right next to me in the rib cage. "Medic!" I cried.

"Jackal sniper!" Sergeant Smith shouted. "Sixty degrees, one-forty meters out, in the crates!"

"Lots of 'em!" a spotter shouted.

"Alright, everyone," the Gunny broadcasted, "Stay low and don't stay out in that kill-column too long. They've probably got snipes ADS'ing right now."

I could see exactly what he meant. The wide lane that bisected the entire lot full of pallets and boxes stretching from our end of the courtyard to theirs was full of opportunity and death for either

side. With no need for orders, Lima Company instinctively bifurcated into their usual subdivisions, migrating away from the aptly-named 'kill-column'. Covenant snipers had little else to exploit here.

The Gunny waved Marines onward once the maneuver was complete.

"Foxtrot Team, Zulu Team, fan out!" He supplemented his order with a tomahawk-chop hand signal. "Whiskey Formation!"

Someone rushed over and pulled the fallen Marine back behind our formation as two dozen or so friendlies broke ranks and comingled in with the maze of supply crates dotting the bay. I glanced backward at the medics, but it was no use to wonder the wounded warrior's status. I was in the front lines and my attention was needed in the fight to come. Another energy beam lanced right past my ear, missing it by a few inches. "Shit!"

I ducked lower and trotted to a place behind some meager cover, some stack of pallets banded together by strap-steel. I swiveled my weapon over the top of it and blind-fired off a few rounds to let my enemies know that I was still here and wasn't planning on leaving any time soon. A Lima Company sniper rifle responded to the attempt on my life with the pull of a hare trigger and a thunderous snap. Instantly after, globs of multi-colored plasma streaked from the other side, splintering pallets and boxes in between the two infantries, just wild shots intended to incite fear and confusion.

Our Gunnery Sergeant balanced on one knee and acquired more precise aim. "Fire!"

We filled the expanse with bullets, some wild, some exact. For a fraction of a second, I craned my head just beyond my other piece of cover—a heavily-corrugated steel cargo container—and witnessed three or four lines of the Covenant infantry drop from wall to wall past a line of shattered obstacles. Their allies further behind trampled them down steadfast and kept coming, now at a jog. I returned to cover.

Smith shouted, "Grenades all!"

Immediately after the Gunny gave the order, every Marine in the front lines simultaneously ripped high-explosive fragmentation grenades from their vests, primed them and chucked them as deep as they could into the bay. Several barely noticeable arcs of smoke poured in from either side as well, further out in the Whiskey formation. The combined, three-sided volley arced over the approaching front and detonated just above a contingent of grunts and jackals, smothering them in devastating concussion, dust and shrapnel. When the haze cleared, there was nothing left of those first few ranks. But another wave approached, this time complemented with low-ranking Elites and a foursome of Hunters—whipping their ruinous fuel rod guns side to side for a demoralizing show of force. If the walking tanks got the chance to come within range...

"Sarge!" I pointed.

"Copy. Rocketeers, Fire!"

A double-volley of rockets let loose from various locations within

Lima Company, all intended to annihilate the Hunter threat. Three of them found their marks and the hulking beasts fell over with a succession of heavy thuds. Secondary kinetic effects took down Grunts close by. The one remaining looked at all its fallen brethren and let out the most dreadful cry I ever heard.

It charged straight for us. It pushed aside comrades and powered forth with ill-regard to its own, trampling those under it. Wood and plastic and even heavy-gauge metal simply shattered everywhere in its path. The rocket jockeys reloaded as fast as they were able while we poured what we could into it. Hollow points, armor-piercing incendiary rounds, nothing could stop it. The armor it wore was far more dense than anything we were sending its way this moment. We started to inch backwards as it got within a stone's throw away and we knew some of us wouldn't make it out of this fight alive. It began to veer in my direction once I emerged from cover to concede some ground I'd gained, its armor bouncing and clanging as it shook the ground with its heavy step. There was no escape for me. I couldn't dodge fast enough. I curled into a ball hoping it would trip over me at the last instant. Maybe someone could take it down in my sacrifice.

My head started to shake inside my helmet as it lumbered down, then a thunderous snap resounded in the chamber and the ground shook even more heavily, my teeth rattling. The noise and the rumbling stopped instantly. Stone flooring cracked and sprayed my helmet as I looked up. The giant creature had nose dived into the ground before me. Sparks formed beneath its armor as it slowly ground to a halt. Ginger-colored ooze seeped out of its back. I looked up and was face to face with the dying monster, a vapor trail lingering in the air from the side. Someone had shot out its back through a tiny gap in the armor. A luck shot, maybe.

I stood up slowly, checking myself for injuries—none.

I had no time to thank whoever it was who dispatched the Hunter. The din of combat pervaded my senses again. I stood up and chose my next target, ducked, and felt a flurry of crystalline energy needles streak past my side, sweeping towards the blast doors behind and ricocheting off its unbreakable bulwark. I retook my stance and was about to take new aim when I saw a brief glint of light ahead and to the right side of the bay, twenty meters out. The glare ceased and I could see the outlines of a door frame. I then saw the Spartan stepping through, disappearing into the outer perimeter of the Outpost beyond the courtyard boundary. The sight of her was like a shot of adrenaline direct to the veins.

My attention was stolen again as nearby shots nearly robbed my hearing.

Snipers took care of a few front-line Elites before the well-disciplined split-lips could line up any coordinated fire. The rest of Lima Company loaded the bay with a variety of rounds. I stole a glance to my right flank and confirmed the heavy-handed sound of an M-247 Machine Gun wielded by Amy. She had materialized at just the right moment. Her green-armored figure barely moved despite the weapon's massive recoil. She operated the thumbstud triggers in short, tightly-grouped bursts, only when needed. And with natural battle-hardened instinct, Marines lurking in the shadows further ahead spewed out harassing fire to the flanks of the Jackals and

Grunts marching down the center aisle of the bay once they witnessed the Spartan's motives. With no choice, the approaching enemies re-positioned their multicolored shields to the left and right, leaving an unprotected hole for Amy to exploit with massive firepower. Dozens of enemies fell under her barrage. When the Jackals swiveled their protective devices to face her a second time, once again Teams Foxtrot and Zulu either harassed or killed outright.

More and more began to fall and I sensed the momentum was ours, then a squadron of Covenant Banshee aircraft rose from the ground very far away in reply. Their canards soon began to glow a distinct purple haze against the amber sun, soaring our way with barely enough ceiling for them. They zoomed beneath the awning-capped expanse at what seemed full throttle. Lima Company would soon face fire saturation from above. And the Covenant troops ahead weren't stopping their advance despite how predictably unsuccessful it had become. Though we were immensely capable, our forces numbered too little to prosecute a two-sided battle and every Marine knew it.

"Everyone, throw grenades now!" the Gunny commanded as he studied the incoming threat. We complied and threw our second salvo of grenades to the front. Once more, chaos reigned over the nearest enemy lines, stunning them. In their momentary confusion, Smith then ordered: "Now everyone, fire at the fliers!"

We followed the Gunny and waited for the bogies to come within range. Each Marine emptied round after round until everyone was forced to reload. Depleted Uranium bullets from Amy's turret ricocheted off some of the purple hulls. Eventually the weak, unshielded armor cracked under her barrage. The vehicles began to smoke, a dead giveaway at impending failure. One by one, they began to lose what little altitude they had. The outcome of the Gunny's tactic rewarded us with six destroyed airframes plummeting to the ground, some landing on the Covenant infantry. The remaining two strafed hard and broke away at maximum thrust. They soon disappeared into the sun's glare.

But even more infantry emerged as the bodies steadily accumulated, simply littering the Covenant frontage, this time with more Hunters and Elites than before.

The Gunny ordered another salvo of grenades from Lima Company over the enemy lines. The strategy worked quite effectively and yet the enemy Commanders were not adaptingâ€”and I wasn't terribly surprised. The behavior of Covenant field commanders had been well communicated to all UNSC personnel for many years now. They either refused to change their methods out of the hubris typical of their sheer numbers and technology, or Lima Company was simply more battlewise than them today. Presently, the more they advanced onward, the more sluggish they operated as they met the blockades of their own, dead comrades in front. The majority of their close-air support was destroyedâ€”now non-existent. With no aerial threat, the Warthog then had enough safe distance and the driver pulled the vehicle ahead, swerved to the left and skidded to a stop in front of our formation. The turret operator lined up targets, already had a prioritized plan of attack and immediately went to work. The gun dispensed heavy gauss slugs into any heavy target as if prescribed to them. Elites and Hunters were prime prey as lower infantry from both sides traded shots. They all fell one by one by the railgun's immense lethality, bodies thrown

back in a blur.

Hunters certainly numbered too many at the present and wisely took stock of their unexpected outcome. A single vehicle was inflicting fatal damage wherever it struck and the Covenant numbers began to dwindle by the pairs. But Hunters adapted. They began to meander their way through the mazes undetected. Occasionally, I'd witness a set of antennae blur between boxes. They were able to hunch incredibly low, beguiling their size. Some Marines tried to bowl in grenades down littered aisles, which only detonated harmlessly in front of the Hunters' massive shielding. They pressed further on as our rounds pinged harmlessly off the visible portions of their dense armor, two of them now within range to use their fuel rod cannons if they decided to emerge from what meager cover there was. Just one blow from such a weapon would put Lima Company in a daze. If they got in close enough to neutralize the Warthog, it was only a matter of time before the Hunters would turn their sights back to Lima Company infantry to effectively halt our momentum. Pure luck saw against it.

Just as a Human rocketeer was zoomed in for the kill on a Hunter pair, he received a pleasant surprise: a Marine's grenade landed right at a Jackal's feet, blasting the turkey's shield out of its grasp and clear across the entire battlefield towards its allies. It frisbeed through the air fast enough that it took a Hunter's head clean off through the gap in its armor, leaving its bond brother so furious that the can of worms never saw the RPG that whistled its way. The Marine's leftover rocket was used to target a lone banshee that returned to battle for a surprise strafing run. The Covenant flier would've surely caught us off-guard, but instead was instantaneously converted into a plummeting glob of molten metal and plasma that showered its cohorts down below. The large group of unlucky Grunts and Jackals at the crash site were crushed and instantaneously reduced to blue-purple mist, spraying adjacent allies and wreaking more havoc in their catastrophic advance.

With weapons raised, we cheered. In our brief revelry, a few lucky shards of Covenant needler rounds seeped into Lima's formation and found a few marks. One Marine let out a yelp as a single fragment ruptured their stomach, blood and bile leaking out the entire waistline once it detonated from within. Another one of us was much more unfortunate. A dense mass of the pink crystals tore all the way through plating and clustered inside their torso. What was to follow was horrid. All of her disappeared. My HUD no longer received any of her biometrics. Her telemetry stopped transmitting. She was gone.

The sight gave every Marine pause.

Haze froze where he stood, unable to process what happened for some seconds. Instantly, he broke out into a full-on automatic fusillade, swept his muzzle wildly side to side. He easily emptied an entire magazine into the air in front.

"Now you die!" he shouted.

He began to charge ahead.

"Private Haze!" the Gunny commanded. Our senior NCO ran to the bewildered Private's side. "You will contain your fire, Haze. You're

doing nothing but peppering the air." He then placed a soothing palm on top of the rifle's muzzle, and Haze reluctantly lowered it. "She's gone, Private. If you really want payback, you'll make your shots count. Fall back in line."

Into oncoming fire, Haze ran over to her remains, and on bended knees he scooped up what was left of her dog tags and gave them a good wipe across his battle garments to clear the soot and ash. "So long, Janine." He sobbed and forced back the tears, finding a place in formation next to me. I readily remembered her face and what her personality was like at the barracks, always cracking jokes at mess.

I threw an arm around Haze's shoulder.

"Janine was a good kid. C'mon, let's me and you bowl these fuckers over and show 'em how good of a Marine she was."

Haze nodded coldly, his face devoid of thought and fear.

The two of us banded together through common rage and popped off pinpoint precision rounds, nailing a score of grunts and jackals in center mass. The collective enemy was not fazed. They pushed on and on despite the Marines dwindling their numbers, and I was forced to reload, during which time I ran a quick roster of Lima Company's casualties. Only one KIA and just a few WIA to at least a few-hundred dead Covvies, I gathered.

I'll buy that any day.

A lull in the Covenant advanced became apparent. Much of the front line troops placed their attention rearwards, focusing on something more important than us. More of them died in their stupor as we kept firing. Something was definitely back there. Before they regressed completely, they looked our way again, backpedaling, retreating.

"You're shitting me." the Gunny whispered, swiping a hand downward in a _cease-fire_ gesture. "I don't believe it."

The hordes of the Covenant army were now running back toward to the sun, leaving behind their fallen warriors, munitions, and their falsified valor. Once they were an amicable distance away, something odd occurred. For some reason, the army parted in half. There was no particular reason for the maneuver, but in an instant it all made sense. The army was clearing a path for something else, making a hole for a line of hovering behemoths charging in our direction. Wraith tanks.

I watched the Gunny study the new development. "Valvalaris?" he radioed with a wily smile. "Fire at will. Send some slugs downrange and pulverize those purple walruses."

The response we heard from the Warthog team was nearly devastating.

"Gunny, I'm so sorry. That was our last round."

Gunny Smith's smile instantly vanished, though I could still see him weighing the situation as he locked his gaze onto the distant

threats.

He relinquished the aim of his weapon and opened a private channel to the Company's Rocketeers. "Ammunition?" he asked despairingly over the comm., his voice signaling reluctance to hear the answer.

The tanks' prows became shaded, now passing under the threshold of the giant awning far away.

All eyes were fixed on the Gunny, waiting for his orders. All we saw from him was a slight nod, his face less than optimistic as the rocket jockeys in the distance reported in. He shook his head somberly, recognizing defeat. But then, instantly, his features morphed into determination...or spite. I couldn't tell.

"Oh-seven-one." he broadcasted. "Report in."

He reloaded.

I stood tall and peered beyond.

"Everyone, fan out." Smith ordered as the wraiths approached at top speed. "Oh-seven-one, do you copy? Is the code word given? Spartan!"

I could now hear the low whistle of their powerplants, skimming inches off the ground that swiftly passed beneath them.

I sensed this was Lima Company's final maneuver. We didn't have the time to fall back to the interior. We were under-equipped, we were out of communication with our best hope, and our enemy was en route. This was our last stand.

Maybe HQ sent reinforcements and they were on the way. Maybe they would take the same journey we didâ€"through the forests, through the halls, and on to this forsaken North side. Finish what we started. Maybe uncover our remains and form guesses of what happened here. Maybe the enemy was thinking the same.

Maybe we were the ones to make the sacrifice this time around.

Our rocketeers readied their last rounds and made what preparations they could in what was to be our closing moment. Random soldiers then scoured the grounds around them for Covenant firearms or fresh plasma grenades, anything.

I looked around, though not for advantages. Luck was lost upon us. Instead, I scanned the faces. I didn't know everything about what it was to be a Lima Company Marine, not yet. But I knew that these were to be the people that I would spend my last moments with. They could've been anyone, though: scientists, farmers, entrepreneurs, anyone. Here, in this moment, they were Marines. They swore to protect every good thing they'd known about their home and this world. Not one of them ever broke that oath. I could be proud to die here among them. I thought about the family I left behind on another world and smiled as precious memories of them became apparent. I was prepared. A bright flash then emanated from far beyond the encroaching Wraiths. Every occupant North of the outpost gazed that direction. Soon, the invading forces were engulfed in something

otherworldly. A sudden spike of heat filled the bay, and a new sun appeared on the horizon. A white light blinded my eyes and filled my dreams.

6. Reprieve and Solace

****Reprieve and Solace****

My eyes were useless in this fire—brighter than anything I'd ever witnessed. A flare of heat singed the hairs off my hands as I brought them up to cover my face. A howling sound came as a wind brushed me off my feet and into the concrete of the courtyard. It swept me back into the foundation of the loading platform where I remained fixed and pinned down, a tsunami of debris pelting my armor and helmet.

The heat was gone and the wind subsided. The light faded as I opened my eyes.

I was the first to rise. I looked side to side and gauged the remaining Marines of Lima and Sierra Company. Each of them appeared lucid. I was ready and able to finish the job, but this colossal column of smoke dominated the view past the courtyard awning, suggesting the battle had definitively ended. The metal canopy looked about finished, sections of it drooping and sagging off its frame, glowing dull-amber, gone at the Northernmost tip. Though we could only make out its incredibly thick trunk, the pillar of smoke mushroomed high into the air beyond our point of vantage and dwarfed everything.

Wraiths and shades and bodies littered the bay. The radial concussion brought some of our vanquished foes closer. Smoking, smoldering, decaying. Past gouts of smoke and fire, we could make out the twisted remains of anti-aircraft batteries. Farther out, there was nothing.

I cried at the top of my lungs at the sight of it all. "Ha!"

Slowly, everyone else rose and took stock of the aftermath.

The miasma of the bay did not stifle the swelling cheer that circulated among the Marines.

"What?!" Holmes cried, shifting his stance. "That crazy-ass Spartan nuked the whole damned valley?!"

"She did what Air Staff couldn't even do." Gunny Smith smiled.

"They got nuked," Haze said, "but so did we."

He may very well have been right. We had just come face to face with the resultant ionizing radiation, even though the nuke itself could only be considered little more than a dirty bomb. Fury tac-nukes were very low yield, only useful in close proximities to their targets.

The unit's polymer ensemble gear was impregnated with captive ions whose wavelengths would normally be one-hundred-eighty degrees out of phase with most of the known alpha and beta emitters that were

undoubtedly present. The radioactive dust would be repelled and prevented from seeping through the external layers and into anyone's skin. Gamma rays were short-lived and were likely concentrated about the epicenter. Whatever fallout was still out there, we were lucky that any Covenant would've absorbed the bulk of it all.

"Small price to pay for victory." the Gunny smiled. "Alright everyone, it's not over. Fire teams, form up and scour the area for any Covenant. No prisoners. Afterwards, make your way back inside and prepare your after-action reports. Be on the lookout for Amy."

The Marine snipers were greatly thanked as they put down the stragglers, making the cleanup much less risky. Marines began to clear the blast doors. I watched them close with a hiss behind them. I stole a few more glances about the bay, then followed behind them with a few other Marines at my side. We were the last to clear.

After passing the access ramps, we found ourselves once again in climate-controlled paradise. The floors were deep-black obsidian—highly polished to give immense depth. It gave me the disconcerting sensation that I walked on a sea of black ice and might fall in with every step. Much further ahead was the impenetrable vault door separating us from the ravenous contingent of Covenant still occupying the corridors of the administrative offices. Overhead, exposed vent ducting and support girders twisted and curled to their terminus, exhibiting a very purposeful architecture.

To the left and right were gentle ramps leading into a series of freight lifts, presumably terminating at the mines. At the corners of the structure were chromed spiral staircases leading to offices and lounge rooms. The atmosphere of this sector was a seamless blend of function and luxury, I had only now noticed. The walls next to the blast door were taken up by bulletin boards containing the latest safety slogans or the month's summary of mishaps, as well as the breakdown of Covenant species—complete with anatomical silhouettes. Other walls by the lobby areas had illustrious, flowing murals depicting Zagosa's indigenous wildlife. It was an odd yet welcomed transition.

I had never known a mining camp to have anything more than basic provisions for carrying on a hard day's work. Apparently, Foreclay's investors were deep-pocketed.

After looking around, I knew we were in complete safety. I then looked around at some of the Marines. Most were lying on the ground; some stood and leaned up against walls; others took advantage of the plush couches in the lounge area. All of us looked the same. Of course we were all bloodied or dirtied or beaten on the outside. But we all felt alike—all on the same page, knowing what we'd been through. I looked a little closer at them, skimming the contours of their weary faces. I was desperate for an answer, to know what more purpose we had here. But I was met with only lines of regret, of sadness. Shock had settled in.

Then—suddenly it hit me.

"Where's Amy?"

"Hopefully, she'll come." said the Gunny, glancing sidelong at me. He

turned away.

"You mean we're notâ€" I asked, stopping Gunny Smith short in his tracks. I almost didn't want to hear his answer. I knew what it was before he even spoke up. I finished my question as he turned around. "â€|we're not gonna go outside and look for her?"

"...I think she was more concerned with destroying the enemy than surviving, Private. That's not what a Spartan lives for, if you get my meaning. It's to fight and win. Failing that, they will sacrifice themselves so the mission continues. That's what she expects. If she's alive, she'll come back. If not, we have to go on without her. We stay put." He grimaced through the blast doors, then hung his head for a brief moment and sauntered over to a couch. He crashed down into it, wondering, and perhaps, praying, _Maybe she had made it out of there._

I nodded. A kind of silent understanding drifted amongst Lima Company at the Gunny's words.

But Gunny Smith didn't relax long. "Someone get a link going back to HQ for a sit-rep. Tell them we need extraction for the wounded at the North side. And tell them to avoid all other sectors of this mining facility."

"What about the men still at med-lab?" asked Haze.

The Gunny thought it over a minute. "...Who will volunteer to go back to med-lab and get them out? We'll need at least ten people to go."

And a good deal more than ten brave souls instantly raised their hands, Haze included. They formed up and headed for the class-A vault door that adjoined Omega Wing with those horrid hallsâ€"which we had gone through so long ago. I would've spoken up and said something to my friends as they walked into fate's hands, but the words escaped me. Rather, I let them go. The words were of no use. We all knew what one another felt. Words were frivolous leftovers. The absence of our greatest reassuranceâ€"a Spartanâ€"compounded our strife. Something was telling me she was a survivor. She made the decision to disappear behind enemy lines. After all everyone in Lima Company did out there, it didn't seem natural to believe she was gone.

I did an inventory of my gear to take my mind off the notion. My coordination was off and my movements were shaky. I shouldn't have been doing this now. I should've been resting or eating something, maybe stopping by the lounge for a cool drink, but I couldn't bring myself to unwind after everything that had transpired. I suddenly felt unworthy after the impact of Amy's selfless deed hit homeâ€|and especially after the Gunny's discourse on Spartan glory.

A cold lump formed in my throat, almost painful, choking me up. My thoughts wandered to the leathernecks like Janine and Tabs and any other who died today. I took a deep breath, pushed myself up from the floor, and staggered over to the lounge at the third level. I reached the staircase and pushed up step by agonizing step. As I reached the third floor balcony, a few Marines began passing out shotguns to the ten volunteers. They were headed into the worst close-quarter battle of their lives. I felt even more disgraced. I should've been in that group. It was _my _turn to give and sacrifice.

I brought down a few bottles of cold water for my comrades and I. We took our sips and savored the purity, though I think none of us whole-heartedly enjoyed any of it. It didn't seem right to rejoice.

"Radio is down, Sarge." Holmes announced. "Must've been EMP from the blast. Everyone's comm. sets are probably inoperative as well."

"_Don't be discouraged._" a booming voice said from above. The facility PA system sounded out loud and clear. The scientist we encountered when we first entered the Omega Wing. "_I just received a dispatch from Zagosa UNSCDF HQ . You definitely got their attention with the fission device you set off out there. Ahem, Pelican ships have just dropped a load of supplies into the valley and the necessary MEDEVAC ships are en route as we speak. They request your presence at the North side. ETA is five minutes._"

"Some good news, finally." the Gunny murmured. "Everyone, listen up! I want one fire team to stay behind and wait for the volunteers to get back from med-lab. Everyone else, round up the wounded and prepare them for immediate EVAC. We're going back outside."

The Marines of Lima Company made their preparations again for a return journey into the courtyard, only this time we'd march through the place the enemy once dominated.

The doors reopened. Intense heat attacked the nerves of my face, barely tolerable. The aftermath of the battle plain was revealed, though the smoke hadn't fully cleared.

The top of the hill just beyond this next obstacle. We were to stay for the foreseeable future. Someone high up made the call, ordered that the UNSCDF's presence here wouldn't stand down any time soon. With all the heat and carnage and fatigue, I didn't have the mind to ponder why the Covenant would commit such an effort to this remote facility. There was nothing around for miles. This was just a mining outpost, on the fringes of the Zaragosan frontier. I wondered if the Covenant forces were suddenly in dire need of resources or some kind of sustenance and that only this area had plenty of it to offer. Why else go all-in with the might of a Brigade? Memories of the battle outside replayed in my head. The various boxes and pallets that shattered from weapons fire and explosion all contained gems and rare-earth metals.

I reluctantly followed my team down the loading platform once again and crashed into the blistered concrete below, conscious to consult my Geiger Counter at regular intervals. The pain throbbing through my lower extremities from the jump-down barely registered, I was cognizant of only my surroundings now that Lima Company was in the thick of the danger once again. The sight in front blackened my spirits ever further. Covenant carcasses were still strewn about the flattened, charred landscape, corroded with radioactive fallout and fleshy decay. Non-living objects were still hot to the touch as heat wavered off their surfaces and distorted the air around them, and the smell of ozone and engine oil and burnt animal hide saturated the ambiance. My nostrils were on fire with the amalgamation of stench. Strangely enough, a sliver of sunshine broke through the gloom and touched upon all our faces. I involuntarily smiled. We were still

alive.

The enemy was vanquished and we could live on, the Spartan our savior. Aid was en route and we could rest until new orders found us.

But a growing sense of closure came with this new sunshine. I was now one of those jaundiced soldiers that had experienced personal loss in this War, now just that spear of retribution just like she always was. The torch was passed and that was my solace, the most beautiful thing I could ever know from this point onward. My part in the War, this carrying-on, would be her remembrance. Our remembrance.

Lima Company trudges along the battle grounds, as one, alone.

"Everyone make sure your polys are on." the Gunny ordered. "Activate beta-blockers and pop your Potassium Iodide pills. I don't want anyone getting exposed more than we already have."

We complied. After the brief pause, we trekked toward the objective not far ahead. About halfway down the bay I pushed aside a small pile of jackal corpses, their skin still slowly melting away and pooling into a puddle of pure disgust underneath them. The eyes were vaporized, leaving nothing but dusty, blackened eye sockets. I looked right and left and took stock of the scene from Covenant perspective. Stillness filled the place. I looked beyond: the giant mushroom cloud had faltered and dissipated, the prevailing winds shearing it to thin lines. Soot and ash slowly rained, the sun blotted, a nuclear micro-winter.

We marched further into the blast radius, nowhere to go but straight-on. The air grew hotter and the rotten smells grew fainter. And soon, there were no smells at all. The only survivors here were bare metal, carbonized skeletons, and shattered armor. We approached what were their massive anti-aircraft batteries, twisted, mangled, and glowing red. Past these inanimate hulks was absolutely nothing, just a blackened turf, no trees or life to be seen. This was the spot where their commanders might've been. Nothing could've survived in the epicenter, a wonder that Lima Company further out made it relatively unscathed. Pinpoint devastation, Amy's attack was. No sooner had I realized that, I thought of her again.

"If they didn't survive, could she have survived?"

No answer was given.

I sensed a hunch in my posture and I started to drag my feet as we pressed on further towards ground zero. For the first time, I didn't want to complete the mission. For the very first time in life, I wanted to give up, but I looked up again. Against the sun, faint, blocky shapes sat at the top of a looming hill, merely a furlong away. Air-dropped supply crates. One shape stood out amongst others. It was narrower, not as tall. It moved.

"Sarge, you see that?" a troop called out.

"Copy that. Everyone, proceed with caution. We could have stragglers."

I could hardly see with the sun so bright and the sweat stinging my eyes. The fatigue from the battle and the blast had nearly drained the life from me, but I held the cautious pace onward with the rest of Lima Company.

I tried accessing my optics, but as expected they were fried from the EMP and residual ionizing radiation.

We slowly marched up the gentle hill, our boots crunching the small pebbles and shrapnel, a cool breeze kissing away the sweat rolling down my neck.

The figure once again moved ever so slightly, maybe making ready to fire?

The sun still pierced my vision so I threw up a hand over my brow. I could still barely see.

"Pennington," the Gunny called, "You're the luckiest SOB here. Move to my position and maybe it'll rub off on me."

I pulled up next to him at the head of the formation. The Gunny always seemed to lighten a situation up and make me laugh on the inside, even in the most dire of circumstances.

I focused in on the figure loitering near our supplies. I still couldn't see it all that well. A bullet train of thoughts raced in my head. Was it a lure? Is there another brigade just waiting on the other side of the hill?

I wanted a fight. I wanted payback. I wanted gain over loss. I've become like her.

As we became nearly level with the top of the rise, the sun sank behind a tall crate...and I could see clearly now. The whole unit froze in awe and wonder. It was not an enemy that I might've been joyed to murder. It was the most beautiful thingâ€|

Pure gold.

A reflection of myself staring back at me.

Amy.

There she was, leaning against a fallen crate, the parachute swaying. She hefted a rifle in one hand, bouncing the barrel up and down in the other.

The Gunny paced closer to the Spartan and stopped short of her, barely out of arm's reach, his mouth slightly agape. "I don'tâ€|how did youâ€|I don't understand."

She made to answer as a brisk gusts pelted her at the top of the rise. Amy was as rock-solid as the crates in the ground, and I had the feeling she enjoyed seeing the Gunny flustered for once.

"How did I escape? Never really had to." The Spartan scoffed. "FURY Tac-Nukes are light weight."

"You remote detonated."

"No. I set a timer and threw it hard as I could. It had to go off the instant it landed. Wouldn't have worked otherwise. These weren't your average troops."

"So, that's it?"

She shrugged. "Yeah."

"But you'd have to be at least a thousand meters away to avoid the immediate effects of the blast!"

"I told you, I was already in the safe zone when I threw it."

The Gunny stole two steps closer. "You mean to tell me you got behind the enemy formation, you threw tactical nuke more than a kilometer out, and managed not to sustain one scratch?"

"Yes."

"Good God, woman. I won't even ask how."

"Never mind all that. This was the easy part. Going hand-to-hand with a camouflaged gold Elite wasn't."

"You killed the Brigade Commander too?"

"I had to be sure it was dead. All in a day's work, Gunny."

"Well I'll be God-damned, Spartan." He surged forth and gave her a hug. She hesitated at first, then bowed her head and returned the embrace to her life-long comrade.

Rested beside here were UNSC crates. A supply drop. He glanced at them, then at her. She nodded, then the Gunny gaited closer and bent down to locate the release tabs. One by one, we all paid thanks to her as we joined Smith in inspecting the new provisions. Then, all of Lima Company reflexively turned sights to the periphery, almost in sync with one another as the distant hum of pelicans caught our attention—just specs on the Eastern horizon. Exuded by the smiles on troops' faces, our morale rightly elated even more. Amy was alive. An entire invading brigade was destroyed. Zagosa Prime had respite, and the wounded of Lima Company could go home and rest. And though we'd be losing some Marines, we gained some in their place. Sierra Company—what was left of them. They proved valuable and they did their part. Without their gauss-equipped warthog and its gunner, our mission surely would've been in shambles. Amy wasn't the only hero among us.

"Well, let's not ourselves dither." Gunny barked over the wail of approaching aircraft. "There's nuclear fallout all along the basin. Just thank the almighty that the winds don't blow this way. Let's get to unpacking our shipment before he changes his mind!"

"Oh, about this shipment," Amy added, "I took a sneak peek while you all were inside."

I looked to the crate next to her and confirmed that she had already been through it. Its side cover was unlatched and swinging freely on

two sturdy hinges. Inside was a plethora of weaponry—the likes of which I had never seen. "Prototypes?"

"Yes," she replied to me, "it looks like Command has seen fit to upgrade our armaments. This is the new BR-55 Battle Rifle, Marines."

She twirled her rifle with grace and handed it to Gunny Smith, butt first. He cordially accepted it with two hands and a grin, inspecting its attributes. He retracted the bolt and examined its action.

"Pretty smooth. Still smell the assembly lube. Love me a well-oiled killing machine."

He then peered down the chamber, positioning the dark tube in-line with the light of day. "Heavily-rifled, I see. The wall thickness of the firing chamber seems higher than an MA5B, and somehow it's lighter weight." He let go of the rifle with one hand and held it with only his right, simply by the buttstock such that the tip of the barrel pointed straight in the air. He then let the muzzle shroud slowly plummet back into his left hand, letting it bounce naturally. "Good balance." he smiled and nodded appreciatively. "Can't wait to try one, but with no Covvie around anymore, Amy, it's gonna be a bit difficult."

A serenade of laughter followed from the Marines. "And I guess we'll just add another four-thousand kills to your tally in honor of that nuking." He finished his inspection, looking back up to Amy's pale visor, then toward the aircraft, or perhaps beyond and into the farthest horizon. "And I'm sure we'll get an angry response whenever that fleet returns. At least I can get acquainted with this thing in the mean time."

"That makes two of us."

"So, in the meantime," Gunny announced, "We'll let the fine men and women of Lima Company guess what this new rifle's capable of."

"Any heavy weapons?" A Marine from Sierra Company spoke up. The voice was unfamiliar to us all, thusly we all turned toward it for our own inspection.

"Who's asking?" Gunny replied instantly.

"Private Jon Struger, sir. At your service."

"You have a bias towards heavy weapons, Private Struger?" the Gunny asked in a serious tone. A smile then crept up on the Gunny's face, barely noticeable in the intensity of the sunlight.

"Actually, sir, yes. You may've noticed I'm somewhat of an artist with them. I was the one bulldozing Covvie with the gauss turret."

All eyes reverted back toward Gunny Smith. I could tell he didn't require anymore small talk. It seemed he instantly took a liking to this Sierra Company Private. He wasted no time.

"Oh-Seven-One," the Gunny prompted, "see if there's any

high-explosive weaponry for this young buck. I think we'll fare better with him in control of it. Everyone else, get this new gear disassembled and back into the facility. And get those wounded aboard the air lifts when they arrive. I'm going inside for a drink. Move like you gotta purpose!"

Gunny Smith strolled back downhill towards the bay with a new bounce in his step and soon disappeared behind smoke and ash, passing through a landscape of decaying carnage. I thought I heard him whistling once he passed beyond the threshold of the bay.

Amy and a few Marines began to disseminate weapons and munitions to all personnel remaining, and Struger got his array of heavy arms. A mix of Lima Company and Sierra Company Marines were rewarded with the latest standard issue military hardware, anxious to put them through their paces if the opportunity ever presented itselfâ€"unlikely.

Suddenly, the roar of Pelican engines crescendoed as the VTOLs circled the LZ and initiated their descent. Our mindset flipped a switch from procurement to extraction, focusing on the Marines in need of MEDEVAC. During the fiasco of rushing the injured onto the ships, I tried my best to get a med tech to look at Holmes' arm. It was possibly the only chance he had at decent care since our own medics were MIA back in the cursed corridors of the outpost. These techs were apparently too busy either loading the wounded or prepping the aircraft for the return journey. Holmes would have to hold out a little longer with his hastily bandaged forearm. I did however manage to "procure" some biofoam from one of the Pelican's airborne medicinal stock while no one was looking.

As soon as the birds were spun up, I flushed out the old fluid in his arm, injected some fresh biofoam and changed out the dressing. A pat on the back and he was good to go. I got back to helping the team with the last of the supplies.

As we trekked back through the scorched battle plain, many of us were anxious to speak with Amy along the way, hopefully hear of a lone voyage into the heart of Covenant territory. For the moment, I hung back in content, suspecting I'd be graced with such a heroic tale sooner or later. Now, I simply enjoyed the sun on my face. The aftermath of the wreckage surrounding us didn't seem to faze me, nor did the horrific scene of the Brigade's demise. A company of Marines and one Spartan trudged along in relative peace and quiet, passing under the mangled awning overhead, through the spoiled bay, up the loading dock, and finally into total safety. The door closed behind us along with another chapter of my life.

I paid no more mind to my own thoughts. I yearned for more rest. Good laughs would surely ensue once I was whole again. Somewhere in my distant hopes was the word for Lima Company to pack up and go home. I looked ahead to Amy, proudly marching us beyond last ramps and into the Omega Wing. The back of her armor glistened in the waning light.

7. Old Faces, New Faces

****Old Faces, New Faces****

The spacious interior of the Omega Wing was a welcomed sight once again. It was starting to feel like home, though it seemed to be an eternal struggle to be free of all the distractions the main lobby had to offer. If there was a single, best fact I could take away from Basic Training, it was that you should never allow yourself even a moment of complacency.

But I looked around, looked at various faces of Lima Company. It wasn't hard to relax inside the Omega Wing.

With the high vaulted ceilings, the rock-solid walls, climate controlled air, friends and comrades milling about, and the amenities of a four star's private retreat, we felt safe here, maybe too safe. Was there such a thing? With humanity's enemy as mighty as they were, I couldn't deny it. Nevertheless, Marines congregated and shared recent war stories, told the jokes, broke the ice with unfamiliar faces. Life had flipped a switch. Everything that we worked so hard for could be enjoyed. We readily embraced it, no doubt, but to me it felt inconsistent. Inconsistent to how we were trained. Inconsistent to how we should've felt. Inconsistent in the mind of the enemy.

The Covenant _never _turn the other cheek. To have denied a Covenant brigade led by a zealot who campaigned this world for months was unheard of. Once they reared their might towards the outpost, they were destroyed in a matter of hours. I knew this kind of luck wouldn't hold even while we laughed and reveled in total safety. A burning in my stomach told me our triumph could not last much longer. The covenant force would fail to report in at its established interval, and then even more forces would arrive. The only question was _when. _This dreary chain of logic pulled my mind to the side even as I smiled and sporadically joined in the fun. Amy was a little distant too. I could see her keeping a steady buffer at the far end of the wing. But wasn't she always distant? Was I imagining things again?

A gut feeling told me she was thinking the same as me. She wasn't just taking a side seat or spectating as usual; she was formulating a strategy even as Gunny Smith celebrated. She's contemplating, calculating. She's dead-set on winning.

Her visor was locked onto something, the entire soiree, maybe. Taking it all in. She didn't notice me staring her way. The Spartan's mind was working multiple tasks, I could sense it. Her armored figure was imposing, tensed and ready for action. But there was none at present. There was nothing Lima Company could do. How does a group like this one instantly wind down after all that had transpired? I took it in from as many other perspectives as I could. In such a short timespan, we had accomplished so much, lost so much, experienced so very much.

But of course everyone was different, despite all the training and indoctrination into a job of conflict. A contract for most. For others a career. For even few others, a life.

I looked around again: the room was still alive with conversation, Marines reenacting pieces of the battle. Some kept to themselves in sorrow—turning away an empathetic other—still picturing something horrid in their memories. Too many friends were lost today. Some were already on their way home with defeat on their mind. Eventually, the

grief-stricken Marines shook it off one by one and took part in the festivities. There might be a better time and place to grieve properly. Maybe I had already grieved enough. Maybe a little celebration was needed after all.

Haze stood near a small crowd, nodding as the Gunny described our harrowing journey into the Omega Wing to a few Sierra Company Marines. Holmes tried to pay full attention but was occupied with an itch near his wound. Gunny Smith's hand movements were swift and steady as he regurgitated every detail of that close-quarter stampede we fought through just before our arrival at the Northside battle. They were smiling and laughing heartily at the tale. The ambiance was a total buzz from the amalgamation of noise inside the Omega Wing, and it was all a welcomed blur of sounds, rather soothing to me.

Amy had strolled off since my in-depth observation of things, to where I didn't know. She had left my sights and therefore my thoughts. I decided to recuperate as others had already begun when something about Holmes caught my attention. I walked over to where he stood, currently next to the Gunny and his captive audience. He looked rather somber, out of the moment with his gaze frozen to the deck.

"Holmes, you thirsty? I was going to get some water."

His reply was instant. "I'll go with you."

He collected his rifle and rucksack off the floor and dragged them both by the straps a short distance to the nearest break room. He was exhausted. It would take some time for others, but eventually they would hit a wall once things quieted down.

"Our morale is lookin' pretty good." I remarked with a glance over my shoulder.

"Thanks to Amy."

"Got some new people in the ranks too."

"Yeah, that Private Struger seems like a real go-getter. That Gauss Hog was pretty nasty out there. Compelling accuracy. I gotta hand it to 'em."

I looked rearward again as we walked. Though there were significantly more UNSC personnel here than before, there was also a much larger number of Foreclay scientists roaming around the wing. I had only now noticed it. They walked in bee lines straight to their tasks—whatever they may be, zipping around the complex very briskly. They stopped at specific offices off the main square only to be on the move seconds later.

"Looks like their business picked up a little." I said, pointing around. "I wonder if it has anything to do with us eliminating the brigade. Was it always this hectic inside?"

"Can't be sure," Holmes furrowed his brow, "but I want to say it was _less _busy before."

I even saw old Hal Overton milling around one of the break rooms across the way. I hadn't seen the forklift driver since we first

arrived at the Foreclay outpost, many hours ago.

"There's that forklift driver from the South side."

"Yeah," Holmes said, "it is. We'd be dead if not for him."

"True. Very true. And the brigade would still be at the North side, maybe busting the walls down by now."

"Eh...I doubt they could do that."

"Yeah," I relented, "you're probably right, but Sierra Company looked like they were in trouble out there. Good thing we made it to the docks when we did. All thanks to that little forklift."

"Yep, just another life-saver around here."

"I wonder how the old man is holding up."

We both looked to Hal. He was now at a break room we were slowly making our way towards. I thought our eyes met for an instant so I nodded to him, but he turned away. Even if Hal did notice me, he was apparently too busy for chit-chat. Even the non-verbal sort. He soon entered one of the freight elevators with a cold soft drink in hand. He was gainfully employed judging by the tempo of his step. He descended before we entered the break room.

Everything seemed to be going quite well, then I remembered Lima Company troops were still MIA back in Med-Lab. And another ten bodies had been sent to rescue them. I tried not to dwell on it. All we could do was sit and wait. Hopefully, the ten-man shotgun corral would wipe the floor clean with the remaining Covenant or at least strike fear into them. With that, I followed Holmes into the break room and went straight for the fridge.

The soda cans caught my eye. I had already fully hydrated many times. This was the perfect time for a treat. I popped the top back, took a swig, and swished it around with a cold smack of my lips. "Ahhh, haven't had one of these things in forever."

"Pretty good, eh? Hard-earned drink today."

"Needs rum."

"Agreed."

"I guess you never really appreciate the little things until you suffer a bit."

I stood at ease, leaning against a wall. My breath started to slow and I was finally relaxed. Marines were casually sharing their stories outside. Others sat, cleaning their weapons while some stood and listened idly to conversation. But the most noticeable movement taking place was those scientists again. It was as if nothing else could exist but their next task.

"Holmes, you ever wonder what it is the Foreclay scientists are into out here?"

"Haven't had much chance to, but now that you mention itâ€" "

"I mean...Look at them. It's like they needed us here for years, like only now are they able to accomplish any work."

Holmes glanced at me and shrugged, taking a slow gulp of cool water. "Well, whatever it is they needed to do, it definitely required a lot of protection from the Covenant."

"Yeah, and a fortress with a massive loading bay."

"Shakespeare, it's a mining facility."

"An EMP-hardened one?"

"Hmm."

"And blast-grade doors? I haven't got the slightest idea why this place would need all that kind of protection."

"Seems like you and me are just as interested in this place as the Covenant are. Maybe it's an old bunker from the old wars? Weapons storage or something."

"I'm just saying it would help to know a little bit more about why we're here."

"I usually leave that kind of stuff up to the Gunny."

"Yeah, but they're blowing him off too."

"Maybe you should try talking to one of them."

"Hasn't been much reward to hunt any of those lab coats down. Any time I approached any of them, they blew right by me like I was invisible."

Holmes took another slow drink of water as he looked out of the break room doorway, to the multi-leveled office section of the Omega Wing. "Well, it seems they're _very _occupied at the moment."

I was about to mumble something spiteful as one of the scientists brushed past the break room, but an outburst struck a discord in the harmony.

"They're back! The Marines are back from Med-Lab! Open the door!"

The scientist that ignored us suddenly rushed over to the class-A vault door, his white lab coat flapping as he breezed by.

We stepped out of the room and hung just outside the door, looking onward. An instant later, the scientist stopped short of the vault and entered in the appropriate combination. Marines made room for him, then gathered around with weapons drawn towards the entryway. The seal broke with a hiss and the heavy door swung inwards into the wing. Fourteen Marines piled in the lobby like a stampede.

They were all here, none of them perished—a miracle. And as far as I could tell, no one was injured. A cheer echoed through the spacious interior. Amy moved like lightning and shoved the door closed, much

to the lone scientist's content. And as soon as it was secured, every other scientist went back to their affairsâ€”uncanny how they were all on the same page.

"They're like little worker bees." I said, my attention strangely drawn to them rather than the returning Marines.

"Quite industrious." Holmes said absentmindedly, scanning the Marines.

I looked back towards the fourteen that had just made it through. The crowds gathered and celebrated their return.

"Let's walk over there, Holmes."

We moved as one towards the scene.

As we neared, the Gunny cleared an area just off the crowd and quickly attained everyone's attention with mere presence.

"Lima Company," he said, casting a rigid smile, "You've done very well today. You've vested so much in this mission. And together we have lost much. But we couldn't possibly have gained any more than we have right now." A brief uproar of cheer resounded through the wing before he continued. "It feels good to have the rest of you back and safe. We've won this battle, but let's remember there's still a war. And part of it is holed up beyond this little door." The Gunny wrapped a knuckle against it. "This place is nicely dug in, but remember who your enemy is. They are not as ready or willing to take part in festivities as you are. They're thinking of ways, right now, to bust in here and start taking lives...and who knows what else that's in here.

"So, stay sharp. Have your fun, but take a little time out here and there to do what you can in preparing. Glad to have you all back. Carry on."

"Sir," I said, "we've got some motion-activated turrets on tripods from the drop-shipment. We could have them set up outside that door in minutes."

"Excellent, Private. Get whoever you need to make it happen."

I glanced at Holmes next to me. He nodded.

We immediately went to work. All the while, stories were told and laughs were had by many.

I listened in to one particular story as I assembled a turret and began configuring its autotrack programming. Four Marines from Lima Company described to us a horror story. Hunkered down in Med-Lab, insanely lucky they weren't found by the Covenant war partyâ€”_still _roaming the hallways. Scratching noises in the walls, distant screams and wails, and the sounds of ravenous brawls they had to deal with for hours on end while we fought at the North side. They could do nothing but listen and maintain hope that Lima Company hadn't forgotten them, and that we were still alive to come back for them.

I completed the azimuth sweep range parameters and energized the

targeting acquisition system. It was ready to kill anything without a UNSC IFF Tag. Once Holmes and I finished with two gun emplacements outside the small vault door, I moseyed back inside once it was sealed and checked the ten volunteers to see if they had engaged the Covenant in there. None of them were wearing any of the enemy's blood on their uniforms. Either the Covenant war party was somewhere off the blueprints, or they in fact pulled out completely. Maybe they knew their allies to the North were KIA.

I walked over to the returning Marines and offered what help and hospitality I could. One responded to the offer.

"Hey, I'll take some water if you have it."

"Got plenty. Drink up."

"I'm Private Hill." he said. "Call me Lawrence if you want. That's what everyone in Sierra called me."

"You're from Sierra Company?" I asked.

"Yeah, we were first responders here."

"You guys were the primary QRF?"

"Yep. We got ripped to shreds, man. I...I'm still not sure if our NCOIC was able to send a MASCAL report after our Lieutenant went down."

"Dang, man. Sorry to hear all that. I'm sure it'll all get sorted out eventually. Hey, now that these purple bastards are gone, you'll probably be heading back to your HQ within a day at most! My name is Private Pennington. Just call me Shakespeare. You'll understand soon."

"Roger. Glad you heard Command's relay of our distress call. Without Lima, we'd be done for."

"And without you and your unit, we'd be done for too."

"Probably so. You've got mostly Struger to thank for that one."

"How you been holding up since?"

"Alright, I suppose. Had the jitters so I decided to help out the rescue party."

"Waitâ€¦you're just getting back from the Med-Lab?"

"Yeah, I was one of the volunteers."

"Wow. That's awfully nice of you to go out of your way like that for Lima, Lawrence. Truth be told, I'm a little shocked."

"Aw, no worries. Figured it would be better to keep busy rather than dwell on the people we lost out there."

As he bent down to grab water I'd set down for him, I saw the artwork on his helmet. Painted on the side was a skull and cross bone image with two bone-colored pistols pointed squarely at me. Under the art,

a caption read, 'Mr. Nice Guy'. I found a dry humor in it, just as Lawrence probably did when he first drew it on there.

I took a seat on a curved, stone ledge that encompassed a small garden of wheat grass. I felt relaxed again, simply by sitting. As he drank the fresh water, I couldn't help but see blurs of white in my periphery. The lab coats again. I turned my head toward the center of the lobby and saw three or four of them walking very briskly to an elevator, speedier than times before.

"So what do you make of this place, Lawrence?" I asked.

He swallowed and set the bottle down, studying my gaze. "If you ask me," he said quietly, "it looks like the Foreclay Outpost folks dug up something important."

"I was beginning to think the same thing myself."

Of course, that was a lie. I had thought this for quite a while now.

"Why else would the Covenant send such an army to this place?" he added.

"I've wondered the same thing myself. Hey, would you like to check out some new weapons we just received?"

His eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. "Hell yeah!"

He jostled around, waiting for me to lead the way to this new weaponry, but I just handed him my new BR-55 Battle Rifle. "Behold, the brand-spankin' new, BR-55 Battle Rifle." I announced opulently.

"Whoa. This is great! Are we the first to get this?"

"I think so." I replied.

"I think I'm gonna like this better than the MA5B!"

"Wait, wait, wait," Haze said butting and elbowing his way over to us. "What's this I hear about this rifle being better than the MA5B? _Nothing's_ better than the MA5B. Let me see this thing." He snatched it from Lawrence and took one quick look at it before handing it back. "Ha! Half of this damned thing is plastic! What the hell are you gonna do with sissy shit like that?"

"Uhhhhâ€¦it's lighter so you don't have to train as hard to lug it around. And I see a fire-rate selector switch here, which just so happens to have a burst mode. The barrel is longer, the magazine isn't as tall, and there's a scope. This means you're gonna put more rounds downrange, faster and closer to the mark than with an MA5B. _That's_ what." Hill countered.

Haze took a longer look at it this time. Upon a more reasonable inspection, I took it that Haze noted the longer barrel, the higher caliber rounds, as well as tighter mechanical tolerances and lighter weight. "Eh, maybe. We'll see about that when the next battle comes. Just remember, the MA5B has been around since our training days. There's no reason to scrap it now."

"Oh, I'm not saying it's seen the end of service." Lawrence said. "It's still a fine weapon and I'd go to war with it any day of the week. I'm just saying that the Battle Rifle is easier to shoulder and more accurate."

"Oh yeah?" Haze said with a challenge.

"Yeah. Fifty _credits_ says yeah."

"Fine." Haze said, fishing his pockets for money. "I'm Expert Marksman with the MA5B. I can shoot the dots off a pair of dice at a hundred yards out. I'll take that bet and we'll see." He reached for my hand and slapped his credits into my palm.

"I guess I'm the middle man." I said dryly.

"Sure will." Lawrence said to Haze. He placed his wager into my hand as well.

Haze looked at me and then back to Lawrence with a glare, then walked off.

"That's the first time I've ever seen anyone get a rise out of Haze." I said. "You might be the new wise guy, Lawrence."

"Me?" he said quizzically. "Nah, I'm the Nice Guy...look." He pointed to the artwork on his helmet.

"Yeah, I figured. Well, if you need to clean up there's a bathroom right over by the break room. Help yourself."

"Thanks." he answered over his shoulder as he walked off.

After everyone was situated and well-equipped with their weapons of choice, the Gunny gathered everyone around for a briefing, Amy standing stoically at his side at Parade Rest.

"Listen up, team. Apparently, the Covenant in the halls are on the run. We're going to use this opportunity to take back some real estate and give these scientists a chance to collect some things back there. This plan will involve two teams. First team will stay put here in Omega and hold the entrance open and provide egress cover. The second team will file into the halls. They will systematically plug up the vents with sheets of titanium-A battle plate. Guards with CQB weaponry will provide spherical coverage for the welders at work. The team will go by the numbersâ€"one vent at a timeâ€"one hall at a time until we have a comfortable buffer between us and them. I've selected four team leaders to take charge of second squad. You'll each receive copies of the facility blueprints we obtained from Admin. Highlighted, are the vents you need to secure. The goal is to seal forty vents in thirty minutes. Once we have attained this, second team will fall back and first team will fall in to start escorting a few civvies to their places of business. Our objective then is to be as quick as possible in getting them to their desired locations and then getting the hell out and back to Omega. Safety first. We don't advance if a sector isn't _completely_ _secure_. Any questions? Everyone's an expert then? Alright, then get with your team leaders and prepare to kick some ass once again."

I thought the Gunny's preemptive strike was necessary. We needed to be decisive and to keep whatever Covenant there was from getting clever and thinking they could get the upper hand. Though they were isolated, there was still the possibility they could pull off something that would undermine our efforts. Indeed, forceful infiltration was in order. We needed to push them around and keep their spirits low, or hopefully kill them in the process of accomplishing our new directive. The civilians among us apparently needed something from that area.

I was in team two. I was going in first.

I used a few moments to check my gear: survival knife, med kit, flashlight, NVGs, grenades, my new rifle. I held the BR-55 in front of me. I rarely felt comfortable using a weapon I barely knew. If there was action ahead, I had zero trigger time in this rifle. I had no idea what to expect. It would be a learning experience upon the first shot I took. But something about the new gun gave me reassurance. The buttstock was incredibly ergonomic to my grip, yet hard and dense, able to prosecute fierce combat either at distance or up close and personal. My forefinger rested gently against the trigger guard and seemed to easily slip into trigger well if the need arised. The optics were positioned incredibly close to the barrel, but not close enough to impede co-witness of the integrated sights. I pointed it downrange and appreciated the light weight as I stepped into the hall, the door now behind me.

I wondered who would win the betâ€”Haze or Lawrence. It wouldn't matter much. We were all encouraged to rely heavily on our shotguns for the close quarters of the hallways, which made perfect sense. I slung the BR-55 over my shoulder and retrieved my shotgun, loaded with hybrid slug/buckshot shells. The light of the Omega Wing was slowly dimming. A draft of air brushed past me, and Amy appeared in front of me. She intended to take the point of the formation.

Suddenly, the new objective seemed easily obtained.

8. Interception

****Interception****

I trotted to a position behind Amy, pointing my shotgun ill-manneredly down the length of the corridor.

As she switched off the servo motors and the motion detectors, I switched on the brand-new NVGs, quietly muttering thanks to those who'd endowed Lima Company with such a robust supply run. We were equipped stronger than before, though the darkness of the corridor we now faced was a reminder to me that reinforcements weren't coming. This was all we'd get. Was it all we'd need?

Once she finished with the autoturret, we crept down the first passageâ€”just a simple, straight stretch with no detours. At the end was a single turn to the left at ninety degrees. I looked behind me at the two Marines pushing a dolly laden with sheets of titanium-A battle plate and a few arc welders, and furtherâ€”the other teams that would soon part ways with us and pursue their own sub-objectives. The dollies' casters made much noise as they

transitioned over sections of flooring. It squandered what stealth we needed. Nonetheless, we had our orders. The scientists were the top priority now that the bigger threat was eliminated.

Amy and I approached the first junction, proceeded ahead of the team to make sure the next hall was clear of hostile activity.

She slowly peaked around the corner and gave an encouraging wave to fall in. I stepped around the elbow and into the new hallway—and all the light emanating from the safety of the Omega Wing abruptly vanished from sight. The faint outlines of ceiling tiles, office doors at regular intervals, and the occasional drinking fountain recessed into an alcove displayed shadows of their own. Grate covers were scattered about the ground. Small holes littered the walls where Lima Company had unloaded into the enemy's dwellings. The dust from the skirmish had long settled. Now, there was only silence.

Plasma weaponry had discharged here as well, the styrocrete veil burned away in large patches, the steel framework scored beneath. Another battle had transpired.

"Anyone recall enemy fire here?"

"No one answered me."

"...Didn't think so." I whispered.

A mutiny within the Covenant's ranks? It was highly probable with only the Grunts and other small species of the Covenant remaining here, no real leadership elements to guide them. With their mission in shambles, no more reachback and no lines of communication to their command, they'd lost everything. But there were no bodies to be found.

We pressed on.

I consulted my electronic copy of the blueprints and directed welding specialists as needed. Marines took up covering positions for the them, their shotgun barrels resting inside the duct openings. I focused as far as I could through the void—nothing. Amy was calm as ever with apparently no enemy movements registering ahead. Time was progressing in our favor. Two vents sealed up with Titanium-A.

We proceeded further down this black hall.

A minute more of walking slowly, tactically, and another pair of open vents needed tending to. The sputtering of the welding torches helped. Sparks hissed and cracked and flashes of light danced right with the shadows very far into the barren corridor. I gripped the barrel and butt stock tighter, ready to engage at a moment's notice. The sweat slid between the weapon and my palms and oozed between my fingers.

I glimpsed behind me at the progress the teams were making. The light from the arc was somewhat too bright, saturating my optics with quantizing noise, which I had to be careful about. Though the in-built logic circuits would automatically compensate, I still attenuated the light input of the photocells to counteract the intense glare bouncing off walls, making sure counter-inductive electronics lessened the RFI pixelizing my display. It was the only

visual aid for each Marine.

The fiesta of light instantly stopped. Another two vents completed. Ahead, two halls stemming left and right. I remembered this place. We'd ran full speed through it soon after it all went dark. I motioned for additional Marines to cover one hall while Amy and I covered the other. Another couple of minutes and two more vents were sealed. We wasted no time moving on to the next set of targets, capitalizing on our current progress.

Together, we slowly crept around yet another elbow. Amy froze in mid-stride like some stalking predator that was detected. She threw up a swift fist high in the air and a red diamond flashed in my HUD. _Stop_.

There was not a sound.

We kept absolutely quiet and still until she gave the order to do otherwise. I even caught myself holding my breath, my wind all bunched up at the bottom of my lungs. I let it out slowly and breathed back in just as deliberately, gazing downrange and deep into the hall. I saw nothingâ€”absolutely nothing.

I pinged her once with amber. _Status?_

A quick two-pulse of the same came back. _Wait._

I flashed back a quick green. _Copy that._

I waited. I didn't like waiting.

She kneltâ€”odd.

She then opened a low-emission comm. channel to all of us. "Check your RAD counters. See that?"

I activated a spectrum analyzer program and used the HUD as the display. Instantly, masking my entire HUD was a brilliant white. Pure radiation of immense magnitude somewhere in the terahertz range, maybe IR. The amplitude readings were cast way above the electronics' limits.

"A nuke?"

"I don't think so." Amy replied. "According to blueprints, this sector of the complex has no nuclear reactor or any fissile materials storage. And this is way too bright for that."

"Any guess?"

"I could guess," she cautioned, "but this changes our objective. We have to investigate."

She stood back up. My screen went nearly quiet. Over half the radiation disappeared from my view while white lines of flux curled around her outlines and swirled toward the ceiling, the Spartan's shields caught in an invisible vortex.

She led us to a nearby door to an office. We each took our positions and brought up on either side of the frame, waiting for her signal to

breach. Amy slid a fiber optic probe underneath the door sill, flexed it around a little, and patched it into her suit. She turned and gave a thumbs up and casually opened the door with a twist of the knob. It was a very small office room—about ten by ten. Some storage closet. There was no desk or computer terminal or chair. It was just an empty room aside from a Covenant device that occupied its center.

Some sort of striated, redish-purple rectangle, standing on its long end. Shooting upwards from it was an intense ruby-red beam—almost painful to look at. I set my optics to full polarization. Amy's automatically did so. The image I saw earlier nearly burnt out the HUD's receivers. Now we were inside the room. Not wanting to risk breaking my new equipment, I was content to cover my eyes with my own hand.

Through the gap between my fingers, I could make out the hole in the ceiling that was blasted away by some high-impact plasma discharge. The Covenant apparently wanted that obstacle gone so this apparatus could broadcast its energy straight up into the sky unimpeded. Only one kind of weapon was compact enough and powerful enough to clear ceiling away.

"Amy, I think we've got Hunters inside."

She acknowledged coolly, "Roger."

She studied the room and the device. Shallow rays of light bent inward through the oculus above, lighting the contraption well. I tapped a knuckle on its surface and it rang hollow. The powerful beam made me nervous. Something this powerful could traverse half the galaxy with ease.

"I'm thinking 'you know who' is on the other end of this thing." Lawrence said.

I nodded.

Too much time went by. I motioned for myself and the other two Marines with me to step outside and cover the hall while Amy continued her scrutiny of the high-powered device. Only a moment later, Amy emerged from the room holding a fist-sized stone in hand, motioning the order to fall back and regroup with the welders. A quick glance back into the room and there was no light emanating from the Covenant equipment anymore. She'd somehow disabled it.

The welders had made exceptional progress in our absence. Through their heavily-tinted masks, they could easily sense our anxiety. The security and comfort of Omega Wing was on all our minds. To our relief, the rest of the mission went unscathed. The last of the target vent shafts were sealed within minutes and we soon found ourselves double-timing it back to the heavily fortified entry of Omega Wing.

We cleared the threshold and the weight lifted off my shoulders at the sight of Marines and Scientists, Gunnery Sergeant Smith waving us onward. I took a deep breath and looked around, praying that this kind of luck would hold out for the next team of escorts. First team was already passing us by and disappearing into the yawning darkness. Camouflage uniforms and white lab coats scurried away and became one with the black.

9. The Bearer of Exceptionally Grave News

****The Bearer of Exceptionally Grave News****

I looked around the Omega Wing and took stock at welcomed surroundings. Omega Wing had become a second home to me, to all of us. The interior space was the temporary ballast against the tension and grief we'd endured. The air was clean and crisp and you could relax anywhere you looked. This refuge reminded me of my childhood home, always constant and safe. But I couldn't bring myself to relax despite how easy it seemed. A sense of urgency tugged. There was still a mission. I had to take part in every aspect and see it through.

I tried not to get lost in the peaceful surroundings. I looked at some of the Marines staying behind. A flux of emotions were registered on their features. Worry, anxiety, hope, determination—all, so much to deal with. But I could never tell what Amy was truly thinking. There was a constant barrier between us, a wall of shielding buffering the very air amid us and the gold sheen of her faceplate—stripping her eyes from my sights.

I approached her and asked, "Hey, are you alright? Thirsty? I took some water if you need it."

She tilted her head towards mine and paused there for a moment in that posture. She could see right through me with her steely gaze, reading me like an open book. She threw up a hand and looked away. The gesture signaled that it was I who needed looking after, not her. "I'll be fine." she said flatly.

Feeling sheepish at her response, I looked elsewhere. The scientists roaming the outskirts were just as evasive. Still, they could be seen one moment and another they'd be gone. Their priorities were paramount, whatever they were. I could never get through to them, not even in downtime. Worse, there was no task, nothing of utilitarian importance for Lima Company to accomplish. We were literally frozen here in this place without objective. I was stuck in a state of uncertainty and the frustration had finally begun to mount. It felt so wrong not to investigate things further, but where to start? There was no help to be found in anyone or anything. Were my thoughts spiraling?

I then took a seat.

I caught Lawrence out of the corner of my eye.

"You alright, Shakespeare? You look a little winded."

"Felt like sitting for a while. I'm good."

"Good, good." he said. "Catch your breath and rest a bit. You did your part. Let first team do their thing and then try getting back on your feet, buddy." He glanced over to the massive green figure standing motionless. "Don't worry about that Spartan, either."

After a few moments, I felt better. I drank some water, stood up and stretched. Amy moved. She walked across the broad expanse of the main

lobby and ascended one of the spiral staircases in the far corner. "Where's she going?" I asked.

"Beats me." Struger said, preoccupied with inventorying his supplies.

"What makes her so special that she gets to just disappear at any time?"

Lawrence chuckled, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, she goes freaking AWOL whenever she wants."

"Since when has she ever gone AWOL, Blake?" Holmes said, strolling closer.

"Since god-damn always. Is she clearing this kinda shit with Gunny?"

"She's technically not required to. You know she outranks Smith."

"_If _she wants to notify him," Haze interjected, "she'll do it out of courtesy."

"It's bullshit." I replied.

"Penn, you need to do a vector check." Holmes said firmly, the first time I ever saw him get stern on someone. Me.

I stood up, trying to get a better view of her, but she soon faded from sight. My mind was starting to spiral again. I sat back down. Something definitely wasn't right. More frustrating, I couldn't put a finger on it. I couldn't figure out just what it was. I just knew I had a bad feeling about something. Now, with nothing to accomplish I either needed rest or I needed to find something to do in the absence of orders. Maybe I should've been in the halls with first team, getting the mission done. Maybe that's what I neededâ€"for this whole thing to be over, to help see it done. All I knew is that I couldn't bring myself to relax.

"Pennington, what's up, man? Why do you look like you're about to clobber somebody?"

I looked down and I hadn't even realized my fists were clenched. I took a deep breath, looked around and realized I was currently the center of attention for a small, gathering crowd.

"Just relax, dude." he said, taking his helmet off. "You're stressing."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Sometimes, you need to know when to rest." Haze then said, seating himself across from me. "I've seen you. You took more than a normal brunt. Fuck, you almost got vaporized before we even had an engagement. You deserve rest more than anyone here. So, take advantage of it...while you still can."

"You really think so?"

"I _know _so. And believe me, the instant Gunny gives the word to rack out, I'm done."

"You're right. I guess I just needed to hear it from someone. Thanks."

"You're welcome, now get to it."

"I'm pretty tired." I said, my eyes suddenly growing heavy. "I think I'll get some shuteye for a bit."

"Good idea." Holmes said. "We'll wake you if anything changes."

I sauntered a few steps away. My nerves were finally at rest as I stretched my body out over a wire-meshed bench nearby. The fatigue finally peaked and it hit me like a rock, and I fell into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

><p>A low murmur of voices woke me, sounding like a buzz at first. I felt incredibly well rested as I opened my eyes. My joints were no longer aching and my hands felt heavy and strong as I pushed myself up from my place of slumber couch. I was instantly awake, fully alert. I checked my wrist watch and only a few hours had passed. I glanced around the lobby and saw all Marines had huddled together in the center, debating, arguing, ranting. A few scientists stood at the periphery in silence. I wanted to be a part of it, like nothing else before.<p>

I felt light on my feet as I marched there. I stepped up to the outer rim of the circle, trying to pick out words of the many conversations. My thoughts immediately went to the device Amy and I encountered in the halls.

A few NCOs observed subordinates, making sure they didn't carry on too far in their shouting matches. So far, no one had gotten out of line, but the worry stirring amongst us was obvious. I found Lawrence at the edge, his brow furrowed, attempting to listen in like me rather than talking over others. One of his hands vigorously scratched at two-day old stubble on his face. I slapped his elbow.

"You look like you just slept with a ghost."

His first response was a glare, then a fraternal grin. "We're waiting on the lead scientist for a sit-rep."

"Sit-rep on what?"

"On the crystal. Don't you know?"

"The crystal Amy had?"

"Yeah, smartass. She went upstairs and gave it to one of the techs for analysis. Now we're waiting on the final word on what it is. Where the hell have you been?"

"I was sleeping. Let me tell you...it's amazing what only a few hours

can do for you." My mouth was dry. I needed water after what seemed like hibernation. "I'm gonna go get a drink."

I stepped away from the main square, transitioning from the black obsidian to a shale-blue carpet of one of the break rooms. I took a cold bottle of water from a refrigerator and began to sip. A few sips then turned into chugging the cool liquid. I downed the whole bottle in just a few gulps, then reached for another and pounded it down as well, then completely satisfied. I took another with me on my way out. Half of the people at ground floor were staring at the East balcony. Amy was there standing firm. The rigid outlines of her armor suggested confidence. At her side was the Scientist—the Civilian we first met in Omega Wing.

For the first time, he looked worried.

One hand held a data tablet. The other was raised in a gesture to quiet us all down. Silence quickly adorned the Omega Wing.

"It is my reluctant duty to inform you all, that what many of you thought is indeed true. The device discovered by Spartan oh-seven-one was believed to be a high-powered Covenant communication terminal. No doubt, the contingent isolated in the admin wings of this facility knew of their ally's demise at the North. It is hypothesized that they transmitted a distress call back to a series of unknown coordinates far away from this star system. This Spartan was able to obtain an unusual rock specimen from an optical scanner on top of the device before disabling it. Just moments ago, our neutron imaging scanners attempted to extrapolate tangible values for rhythmically-arranged inclusions of crystalline morphologies embedded within the rock sample. Coupled with the latest Covenant translation lexicons, our quantum cryptography team was able to decipher the contents of the transmission. What we found was...alarming.

"Lima Company," he said, pushing the bridge of his glasses further up his nose, "it is with great apprehension that I should be the bearer of this exceptionally grave news. A grand fleet of the Covenant is headed this way, with intent to glass the planet."

The entire wing was abuzz again.

For once, my thoughts and feelings ventured outside of Lima Company and the Omega Wing to farmers and doctors and engineers, to all of Zagosa Prime. Mothers, daughters, fathers, sons, sisters and brothers, people I had once known and countless others I've never met. Even in the world's brightest moments there were still those who knew that the Covenant would eventually win, like some cosmic law. It was almost universally understood at this age in the War that humanity was on the backpedal. I grew up in that age. Were our successive wins just a series of chance victories? Until now, the defense forces held them at bay, for which Lima Company was a part of.

Everything would change again. The Covenant masses were on the way. Like the moment the wraiths charged before us at the North side, that dreaded, sinking feeling hit me. This was it. Not just our last stand anymore, the planet's last stand. I then pondered our end, how it would transpire, if there was something that awaited us after. Lawrence shook me. The buzz of the Omega Wing crept back into my consciousness, a loud drone thrumming into my ear as I looked to

him.

"Hey!" he shouted, wide-eyed. "Got any plans?"

The man was scared to death. Everyone here was. As I looked around for an instant, I began to grasp the finality of our situation. In the end, there was little use worrying. It would all be over soon enough.

"Sorry, Lawrence, I don't have a plan."

He let his arm slide off my shoulder. His gaze fell to the floor and he shook his head. "There's no way this is happening. After all we've done, why now?!"

His voice was just a whisper amidst the tempest of emotion in Omega Wing.

A wave of authority eventually smothered the calamity at the lobby floor. One by one, our sights passed up to the third floor balcony where the lead scientist and Amy stood.

"Wait!" I said to Lawrence, who was still consumed in half anger and half fear. "If anyone has a plan, it's the scientist. Let's hear what he has to say."

I could barely see Gunnery Sergeant Smith, lost amidst the shuffle of Marines and civilians in the lobby.

The scientist nodded to Amy by his side. She nodded back. Cupping his ear, he announced, "I've just received word from Intel Forward Operating Agencies that the Covenant are indeed en route. Sensor outposts confirm their fleet passing through the outer rim just minutes ago. If measured in medium to high-tonnage vessels, they number in the triple digits."

Mouths dropped wide open. Disbelieving stares filled the lobby. Tears flowed. It was really happening.

"Ahem..." the scientist intoned, this time with the help of the PA system to seize our attention. "A mass evacuation of UNSC Defense Forces and civilians has been ordered to this facility. I encourage you all to get to the North loading bay and assist evacuees into this wing. Please note that high-ranking officers and heads of state should have consideration over others."

"What's going on?!" the Gunny shouted, easily piercing the ambient noise. "Why are they coming here?"

The scientist thought it over and chose his words rather carefully. "Because this is the only safe place now."

"Of course!" I shouted, wishing I hadn't an instant later.

All eyes were now on me, the silence fully settled.

I forced a steady tone. "Well, why else would everyone in the world come to the Foreclay Outpost? Because the Omega Wing is the safest place. I mean, look at this place. We'll outlast them in here!"

"You really think this place can hack it against a Covenant armada?" Lawrence asked with a wary stare.

"I'm not a war planner, but it's the most hardened structure I've ever been in. I mean, look at these walls. Look at those friggin' blast doors for cryin' out loud! Did you even notice that this place doesn't even have any windows?!"

I had my doubts, but then Haze emerged from the cluster of Marines in the center of the expanse. He strolled up to me and then slung his rifle over a shoulder. "What do you do if the Covenant suddenly takes interest in your world?"

Lawrence answered, "You build a shelter capable of withstanding the unthinkable."

Haze nodded. "Every colony that has UNSC has to have at least one of these so people can carry on. We're in it."

"Omega." Smith said. "The end. The last."

"Then this is what they planned all along." Lawrence said. "Omega Wing is the last stand."

"That's right." I said. "We weren't just lending a helping hand to some civvies, were we? We were securing our own fate, and the world's."

"Yes!" Haze yelled. "We can wait for reinforcements, some other colony can send the cavalry!"

"We'll survive and fight from a place of strength for once!" I glanced up to Doctor Kleiner high above immediately after I spoke. He was shaking his head tactfully as if I had assumed too much. I thought that perhaps I had it figured out, that our presence here was one of humanitarian purpose, but apparently there was something I missed, and I felt as though I spoke out of turn upon his glance.

But speculating was now a waste. Refugees were inbound. I spurred into action, made ready to lend a helping hand to any survivors seeking the Outpost. I looked about and found a place where I could lend my effort to the cause, pacing toward a break room to take whatever provisions it held. "A lot of people will be coming here." I said aloud. "As much as the Omega Wing can stomach."

Not a moment later, the rest of Lima Company mirrored my actions and the wing was bustling with purpose yet again, quite possibly on par with the efficiency exhibited by Foreclay scientists. We pushed back all the couches to the edges of the lobby to make as much room as possible for the inevitable influx of refugees. I grabbed a few more chairs and walked to the vast square of the jet-black tile in the center of the wing. Once I set them down, I took a brief glimpse upstairs as again Amy just about disappeared beyond sight with the Lead Scientist. Like me, I doubted anyone else knew where they were going. She had complete autonomy from the Gunny.

"She's always disappearing. Where does she go?"

No one answered me.

With a higher priority, I double timed it to the North side, down gently-sloped service ramps and wide turnstiles, finally to the massive blast doors. I accessed a nearby keypad and the seal cracked, slowly slid apart. I crossed its wide threshold and fresh air submersed my senses. I stood there and took in the breeze as two other Marines joined up with me. The stench of rotting Covenant corpses was gone, and the ozone and the burnt oils and metals too. We checked our poly suits for rips and tears and made sure they were sealed against the effects of the Beta particles that were still likely to linger. We covered up as well as we could with our issued gear, donned our gas masks and headed out into the carnage.

We labored for what seemed like an eternity, toppling over mounds of corpses in the path from the land outside to the blast doors. We scooped up spent Covenant weapons and tossed them far into the shadowed periphery. Inoperative Warthogs or smoldering Wraiths would stay put. Once a straight path was attained, as one we back-pedaled it to the loading dock. I regarded the bay once more before I passed on to the other side of the blast door. The awning was still holding above, pieces of sheet metal sagging of its framework, the fasteners still clinging to the girders like we would to our survival. Some sections of it dipped down almost to the ground.

"Let's hope those people out there make it here faster than the Covenant can."

But I knew not everyone out there would make it. The sheer distance for some to travel here wouldn't guarantee their survival, and we couldn't possibly fit the whole world. Life just wasn't fair. Maybe by some chance there were other Omega Wings out there.

"Pennington, you really think this place can put up a fight against glassing?"

"Maybe. It's pretty stout. Or, maybe it's like Lawrence said earlier."

"What'd he say?"

"Said the Covenant wouldn't touch this place if they knew what was good for them. Scientists dug up something important here. I might be stretching it, but something is starting to piece together here. How did one and half companies defeat an entire brigade of the Covenant? Something's here that they want, badly. They only took on full strength once they committed themselves right here. The Covenant left behind in the admin sections called for help. Oh, shit...I have to speak with Smith."

I left the men at the loading dock and high-tailed it back to the main square. The Gunny was there in the center, directing the operations inside. I disregarded any protocol and ran straight towards him. "Gunny, the courtyard is clear. Refugees can make it through and into the Omega Wing. What's the word on them? When will they start showing up?"

He took a slow look at me. "I don't know, Private. Soon, hopefully. We'll do what we can here. That's all we can do."

I nodded. "Aye, Gunny."

"Pennington, I haven't gotten the chance to thank you lately. You've done a damn fine job so far. It's been my sincere pleasure working with you."

"Thanks." I said, wondering why his compliment had such a sense of finality attached to it. Was he thinking doom-and-gloom like some others?

I stood straighter, wanting to say more, to let him know how much Lima Company appreciated his leadership, but he turned from me and went back to overseeing some of the others. That was my queue. I had to do more. I had to be prepared for the worst. I high tailed it back to the loading docks. The blast doors to the North gained in size as I rushed towards them. Over-informative bulletin boards were anchored to the surrounding walls and I hadn't noticed them until now. I got only a passing glance as I ran. Every one of them was filled with high-resolution recon stills of Covenant cruisers holding position over some unknown planet, their main batteries connected to the surface below through solid shafts of crimson light. A terrible omen.

I hopped over a turnstile which clicked upon my passing. Their true purpose was to account for shipments going in and out of the facility. Service ramps guided those shipments in and out of this place and I sped down one of them to the foot of the threshold. Past the doors' massive frame I could see my Marines standing on the loading platform, ready to lend a helping hand and be the ones to shut the gates when that fateful time arrived. Past them, past the loading platform, past the bloodbath in the bay, and past the awning were tiny figures. Like the blast doors a moment ago, they gained in size, just black specs from here, contrasting nicely against the blood-hue of the dying sunset.

"They're here!" I announced. A duo of nods answered me. This first wave had reached the home stretch. Before I could get the chance to see their faces and welcome them in, they all froze in their tracks. As one, they acted, looking straight up as a gigantic shadow passed over them. With only a few seconds warning, the shadow over them morphed from shady black to a brilliant red, bathing everything below in illumination. I didn't know why, but a strange impulse drove my eyes to the upper-left quadrant of my HUD where a counter resided. It measured in the hundreds of thousands of lumens.

The sight, both in my HUD and in my widening eyes, was horrifying and simultaneously awe-inspiring. Reflections of crimson bounced off every surface and into the bay, into my eyes. I could not see anymore.

The last things my eyes witnessed before I shut them were those people outside, the light storm consuming their silhouettes.

The insides of my eyelids darkened to normal again. I opened them. The people were gone, simply vanished. Only a smoldering crater of glass appeared where they once stood.

Like a commandment-punishment for taking in such a sinful sight, a residual heat wave advanced towards me with horrifying speed. The approaching blur was all I could see.

"Seal the doors!"

"Bloody Elisa!" Someone shouted. "Bloody-fucking-Elisa! They're gone!"

I wasn't sure who was speaking. All I knew was that I was on the floor, shaking and somehow already out of breath. I could feel a warmth radiating outward from the door. The sight I'd just witnessed didn't seem real. I collected a few breaths at my position and assessed the large hatchway. I trusted its integrity for only a few seconds. I was stammered and working on the willpower to rise again. Like the pure crimson glow outside, the image of a hundred people dying in it was burned into my mind forever.

I made certain of the fact that I was still alive and uninjured.

"They're gone! Can't stay here!" I said, maybe more to myself than them. "C'mon!" I shouted with a gesture further towards the interior. I gasped for air, willing myself to move despite my muscles being doped with adrenaline so heavy that they quivered. "We need to get away from this door."

Despite its reassuring, imposing mass, I wanted away from it. A Covenant armada held a capability that we knew nothing of kinetically. We stammered back to our feet and ran. At the main lobby, the business at hand was the most frantic it ever had been. The place looked like an electron cloud—random, chaotic, dangerous. All military bearing and discipline had broken down. There was no order, only primordial impulse that drove everyone. I made finding the Gunny in the fray my number one priority. Lima Company was now alone here at this outpost, surrounded by Covenant warships.

Chairs and tables toppled over as people scrambled for their gear and for safety—a sturdy pillar or an alcove further out. Marines donned their polys with clumsiness. They hastily scurried and weapons clattered to the ground in their stupor. Some hit the deck, clenching the helmets covering their heads and anticipating the ceiling coming down. We as a unit were nearly broken. I saw one or two get trampled by others.

"I thought I had a good bead on things." Lawrence said, sorting me out from nearby. "...Turns out I don't know diddly-shit about anything anymore."

He stopped next to me taking in the sight. He was like me, awed not only at the strength of the enemy breathing down our necks, but also how easy it'd be to defeat us if they actually breached inward. The Gunny was seen right in the middle of the madness, desperately trying to issue orders. There was no use. And he soon gave up. That's when our eyes met. I ran toward him. "Gunny, this is real bad."

"Worst I've seen it. The Doctor's saying the whole planet is being glassed. I can try and wait for new orders, but something tells me we're on our own. And I'm not taking anyone anywhere outside. We're staying right here."

"We did our best, Gunny."

"I know. It's a damned shame, son. We fought hard, but we can always

take that to the grave."

"Maybe we won't have to, Gunny."

"Why is that? If you know something, tell me!"

"I don't know for sure yet, but I think we'll be safe in here."

"What makes you think? What the Doctor said? You think he's right?"

I glanced at Lawrence and he nodded.

"We think the Covenant are trying to keep this place intact."

"Omega Wing?"

"Yes."

"I'm not so sure, Pennington. I wouldn't bet my last rations on it."

"We're still alive."

"Maybe they're just trying to figure out how to best inflict the max amount of pain they can? They got all the time in the world now."

"No, I think it's more complicated than that. I think they need this location. I think they want something from here. That's why the brigade never glassed this place from orbit. That's why they're not doing it now, either."

"Maybe the nerd squad did dig up something worthwhile, but I doubt the uglies want this whole world a cinder and this place pristine just for a few excavations."

"We have to get a hold of the Lead Scientistâ€¦and we have to find Amy. First we gotta sort out Lima Company. We won't be able to do fuck-all if we can't calm everyone down. They need to know what we know."

"You know, Private, I consider you for another stripe more and more each day."

"Thank me later when we're not fish in a barrel."

"Ha! You bet, Shakespeare!"

With that, we reached outward and grabbed Marines paralyzed with fear off the ground. Gunny Smith nearly clotheslined a passerby's neck as they sped past in lunacy.

"Sometimes you just need a little bit of tough love, Marine!" I heard him holler.

We eventually attained order after a few minutes of literally slapping some sense into Lima Company.

Most were quick to come back to their senses. I was thankful for that. Haze was a different animal. He sat in a chair, head held in his hands. His leg was bouncing up and down at a rapid pace. Some of his hair had been pulled out, some of it still in his palms.

"Haze, it's Pennington."

There was no response.

I tried again. "It's Blake, the idiot who can't low-crawl through a mine field for shit. Gotta _move_, we've got some Covy to grease. Don't you want in?!"

"They're all dead." The withered Private said, raising blood-shot eyes to mine. "And if they're not dead, they're dying. We lost. Zagosa lost this time! And we're all alone in here! What can we do about _that_? It's over."

"He's in bad shape." The Gunny whispered to me. "There's no fight left in him."

"No one's giving up on him. C'mon, Ryan. We're not done yet. Don't kick yourself. There's hope."

"...Hope." he said blankly. "_Hope? _What hope? We're beaten. We're done. They've run us into a corner."

"But we've got Omega Wing! This place is tough as nails! C'mon! We'll give 'em a fight the galaxy will remember!"

"We're not fighting anything! Omega Wing is tough, but what are we gonna do? Hide in here forever knowing we lost? Sounds pretty fucking lame to me!"

The Gunny finally made his way between us, half of Lima Company in attendance to this spectacle. No one interfered with us as they gathered.

I looked aroundâ€¦

Tight-faced and weary Marines had the floor, their hard eyes meeting mine. Their weapons were hoisted and they were steady again. They waited for something good to happen once more in our favor. I knew it would come, because we held the floor, not the Covenant.

"We have to keep going, Haze."

"What's keeping _you_ going, Penn?"

"I don't know. Faith, man. Just a little faith."

"Well, I got a news flash for you, there, Shakespeare. Reality is kicking faith's ass right now! Unless you have a plan that's gonna get rid of a hundred enemy Cruisers, you just count me out."

"This isn't working." Lawrence said from over my shoulder. "Let's just leave him alone for now."

"Alright, but I won't give up on him. Do you hear that, Haze? I _do_ have a plan. It involves finding a scientist first. Preferably, the

lead one. And we're going to find Amy. We are going to make it, Haze."

I wasted no time. I left everyone there and ran to the staircase. I was going to get some answers.

10. Ascent, Descent

****Ascent, Descent****

I had climbed the last step in one of the many spiral staircases. I looked back and realized I was scorning at the sight of it all, the handrails and baseboards and step faces all of a shiny, chrome alloy. It seemed trivial the sort of splendor and decorum put into the place, almost wasteful. Not one troop among us had uncovered what was so special about this mining camp other than the scale of amenity and the horde of scientists.

Coming into focus next to the staircase was all of Lima Company as well as what was left of Sierra. Struger had nothing to do without any large object to blast away and his weaponry had been inspected more times than a pelican before flight. They all waited patiently while I went on the hunt for truth and some sort of plan. Hopefully I'd be the discoverer. I might find where Amy was frequenting in the process. Little else that I'd done amounted to anything thus far, so it felt now. Though I never thought I'd lead an outfit until another couple years and more stripes on my sleeve, it seemed the Gunny and his NCOs were content to let me go on this hunt. But the scientists that were scattered about a few moments prior had all but disappeared and I didn't just sense a frustration among Lima Company...I was literally acting it out.

After a few more moments of fruitless search, I hunched the labcoats retreated into their mainstays, down the elevators. Amy was MIA again. Whatever it was the scientists were trying to keep a secretâ€"even from usâ€"they deemed her worthy of the information.

With that, I double timed it around the perimeter of the third floor balcony just to make sure I hadn't missed anyone. This balcony was much more extensive than those below it, surrounding the circumference of the entire lobby. The palm trees crested to this height, rising to meet me just an arm's reach beneath. I only now noticed them, they blended in so well with the wall murals that depicted a wild setting to begin with. A pseudo-dome beckoned above, complete with cloud and star animations that looked all too real. Down below, that same blackness now had all of Lima Company standing buoyant above it. I forced my gaze away and to the task. I checked every office, running from door to door. Nothing. There was no one in sight. No clues to their whereabouts.

I ran down the staircase as all other Marines loitered around the lobby floor. They'd bored by now, hydrating, inventorying and inspecting anything, making ready for what was next. I ran around the entire ring of the second floor balcony. Every office was empty.

That left only the elevators.

My search ended as I walked down the staircase. The Gunny remained fixated on me, waiting, his hands half-raised in anticipation. "No scientists?" he asked.

I shook my head. The row of elevators caught the corner of my eye. They were tall and wide. The highly brushed aluminum doors exhibited no seam, perhaps more novelty than a necessity. I continued to stare at them.

"Are you sure?" the Gunny queried in doubt.

"Only choice now. They never did lay down any ground rules for us, so I guess we'll just invite ourselves in."

"I guess." he added.

I ran over to the wall and called an elevator with a button. Down was the only choice. A door at the far end instantly opened with a chime. I waved everyone to jump aboard as I walked closer to it. A single elevator car could probably fit half of us. The remainder would have to call their own and hopefully rendezvous at our unchosen destination. We just about reached the doorsâ€¦

The lead scientist himself emerged from the elevator as if on cue, his frail, lanky body turning to face us. "Oh. Were you thinking about going down?" he asked with what seemed a genuine politeness.

"Actually, yeah." The Gunny answered for us.

"I think we're entitled to some answers." Haze added.

The scientist was somewhat taken back by Haze's passive aggression. He pondered our assertion with a hand on his chin, looking down at a tablet in his hand.

"Yes. I believe it is time as well. If you'll please follow me into the car, we'll make our descent together."

The man called another car and waited for it to surface at the lobby floor.

"Not everyone will fit into one. Please split into two groups and choose your own elevator if you're so inclined to see the rest of the facility. You, you, and you should probably come with me." he said pointing to me, Gunny Smith, and Haze.

"Doctor," the Gunny asked, "did you receive any further intel updates?"

"They went quiet shortly after the first glassing."

"Any report on what it looks like out there?"

The Gunny's words were chosen carefully, I could sense. The need to know about peoples' chances of survival out there was only meagerly outweighed by our leader's need to know of the tactical implications as it related strictly to Lima Company's mission, whatever it should be now.

"I would think with that many ships, it's fair to assume the situation looks pretty dismal for anyone not in a hardened underground facility."

"What I was really curious about is troop deployments groundside, Doctor. We may need to take stock of the interior situation here, set up DFP barricades and do what we can to fortify our boundaries. I'd rather not put all my trust into this Omega Wing that everyone holds so dear."

"Little point in worrying about the Omega Wing, Marine. We're headed downward at this time. And I assure you...the interior _situation _down there is much more defensible than it is up here."

He gestured inward.

We complied and made our way into the elevator's spacious interior—stainless walls and floor. I looked back and made sure that Haze came along. The last thing I wanted was for him to be all alone. He brought up the rear and sauntered into our elevator car. He looked a little better than before and I had a good feeling he'd stay that way. Judging by the way he addressed the scientist, I knew he was at least back in the general swing of things. Struger was next, a surface-to-surface rocket slung over his back. I could tell he favored its power. Lawrence, Holmes, and the Gunny were all in too, as well as a few others I hadn't the chance to get to know better yet. It was a comfort to have my best friends near me as we pressed further into the unknown. The doors slid closed and hissed. The cars apparently had their own atmosphere.

The lift started its descent, slowly at first. It gradually picked up speed. After a moment of silence, the rate of descent was still increasing until we were falling very fast. I knew what free-fall was supposed to feel like. I had experienced it many times before. Our current speed stabilized just below what terminal velocity would be at this air density.

The Doctor turned to our glance and undoubtedly sensed some apprehension.

"This elevator shaft is pressurized and the car's accelerometers will control aerodynamic braking systems to throttle our speed downward, so no worries," the Doctor said. "You would've already been thrown into the ceiling, otherwise." The scientist turned from the door face and looked at the rest of us. "We are approaching the mines now. These turbolifts, as you can probably surmise, are dropping very fast to our target—of classified depth of course."

I looked just above the doors at the LCD floor marker. It was blacked out.

"My name is Doctor Eli Kleiner. I am the civilian administrator here at the Foreclay Mining Outpost. I'm sorry that introductions come at a delay, but things have been quite busy here, as you've obviously seen." He once more glimpsed at a datatab held loosely. "I am sorry, Marines," he continued, "we haven't been able to fully disclose some pertinent information to you in the past hours and for that we are deeply in your debt, not only for playing along but for providing protection and escorting our technicians into the admin wings of this outpost. Without your service, the mission could not have been

accomplished."

"What mission?" the Gunny inquired.

"Where to begin."

He began with a low chuckle, scratching at his smooth scalp. "It began several months ago, shortly after the Covenant arrived in-system. During routine mining operations, the previous administration came across a substance that was not categorized or easily referenced in any field of study. Immediate action was taken in the midst of an attempted Covenant occupation. Normally, this thing would wind up in a museum simply because of its rarity, but the ones in charge of planetary defense learned of this too and insisted we come here for analysis. One day was all we needed. The two events occurred simultaneously, you see. The Omega Wing was built. Once erected, the Omega Wing enabled us to continue with confidence in the face of total UNSC destruction. Fortunately for us, the Covenant never knew the exact location of the substance we were dealing with. It wasn't until we energized it beyond some critical threshold that the Covenant zeroed in on our location. This was when we called for reinforcements."

"Lima Company." the Gunny said.

"Precisely, Gunnery Sergeant."

"We were your contingency."

"Bodyguards and escorts in the best case. A demolition and mop-up crew in the worst."

That explained itâ€"why the Omega Wing differed so much from the rest of the facility. It was a brand new addition to the outpost. It also explained why the UNSCDF of Zaragosa was able to defeat the Covenant force time and time again. For every engagement on this colony, we only faced pockets of Covenant armies, fractions of their real strength. They never knew exactly where to tie down their resources, preoccupied and scattered looking for the one thing these scientists already discovered.

"By the time the Covenant found what they were looking for," he continued, "You'd already engaged them quite forcefully. The choice to use a fission device at their gather point was well-executed. It was unfortunate to see a much larger force returning. I'd hoped we had seen the last of them."

They returned out of pure wrath. Or determination. They must've known exactly what they were here for, unlike Lima Company.

I then wondered how the battle was going in space, if there even was a battle. Kleiner had mentioned the Covenant fleet of ships numbered in the triple digits.

The scientist continued. "The Covenant deployed here for those six or seven months had no orbital reach back, which worked out incredibly well to our favor. Once the cruiser dropped of its assault brigade and fled, we still knew this planet would suffer gravely while we conducted our tests. So, we needed the right size force. Enough to repel the Covenant army when needed, but not enough to attract too

much attention. We didn't need you stationed right here, but we needed you close. Close enough to respond quickly. But the Covenant communication beacon that your Spartan found set off the chain of events that we feared most. Needless to say, the exodus failed. I believe we are all that's left. We would've started evacuations sooner, but we had to be certain of key issues first."

"What issues?" I asked.

"We had to first be sure that the device under question acted as theorized. We didn't know its full capabilities until just a few hours ago."

"What device?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I still can't disclose that information until we've reached the mines." He shrugged his shoulders and offered a meager smile. "We'll have to wait until we enter the SCIF...I'm just obeying protocol. We still need to maintain a very tight access. The device we're dealing with is classified under X-ray directive. We couldn't have unprivileged eyes and ears around the facility, the one underground. We're just humans. Mistakes can occur, as you well know."

Another piece of the puzzle revealedâ€”the reason why I could never hope to gain insight into the scientists' dealings. Even Lima Company was never privy to the discovery in the mines. The operational security that the Foreclay scientists exhibited during our stay was borderline paranoia schizophrania, but it was indeed leak-proof.

The elevator halted, though, the doors did not open. Instead, I felt lateral motion and a rhythmic mechanical noise.
Clunk-clunkâ€¦clunk-clunk.

"The elevator is transitioning." the scientist announced. "There are many shafts that lead to the mines, some of which are no longer in use. This transition ensures that we will traverse the correct path and that intruders will waste considerable amounts of time finding which mines are currently in use. Soon we'll enter and adjacent shaft and descend further."

"Really?" Holmes said. "How deep does this go?"

"Extremely deep." Kleiner promptly replied.

There was a lot of time to kill in the ride down. I took the opportunity to assess my team. I made sure they were strapped for the long haul. Indeed we all were. Command had sent us enough supplies to fight a small war. I wondered if there was still a command out there. I had the hunch that the remainder of our stay here would be in the mines, which were undoubtedly the safest place in this outpost, the safest place in the world._

"In case you Marines were wondering," the scientist added, "internal pressure will gradually equalize with that of the mines down below. If not for the elevator's atmospheric regulators, your inner ear would rupture from sudden hyper-pressurization. You would lose all equilibrium as well. This built-in atmospheric equalization feature acts as an intrusion prevention measure itself, further insuring any unauthorized access will result in breaking down the intruders' will

in using any of our transport vectors to gain entry into the mines. That is, of course, if the construction of their auditory organs are as fragile as ours. Adamant security measures must be implemented in this stage of entry to the mines," he added with a stiff nod, "for further in is where the prize lies. You will see."

A smile crept into the lines of his face and barely tugged at the corners of his mouth.

I couldn't help but notice that however calm and composed Doctor Kleiner was, he exuded a distinct pride in the facility he presided over. His delight in the place was becoming boldly palpable—almost to the point of conceitedness. The mines were a special place. I knew it, Lima Company knew it, and the Covenant knew it. But from appearances and his wording, Kleiner venerated it to an almost godly magnificence. I couldn't wait to see why. I couldn't wait to see what indeed it was that they found.

"Well, apparently, we will see!" Lawrence whispered to me.

The elevator stopped. This time the doors opened.

A cool, dry air whisked gently into the elevator. It permeated my pores and excited my senses. I felt unusually awake and alert, yet calm and at ease. I was instantly fond of this new environment, just like the home Omega Wing had been to me lately. Glow rods at steady intervals illuminated the winding way with ghostly-white iridescence. Ahead, the path through the mines twisted and turned with jagged walls and a low ceiling, stalagmites and stalactites jutting outwards. Like teeth from a savage beast, they swallowed the glow rods' radiance with ease as the daring light snaked its way further into the darkness.

One step out the door and I was eager to complete the journey we started.

"I must confess," the scientist said before assuming the lead again, "your visit to the mines is a little premature. We're still in the testing phase and would prefer just a little more time. We wanted to ensure consistency first, but your presence here is justified seeing as how you have given so much. The Captain seems to think it's the appropriate time to brief you as well. I usually don't take chances when dealing with people, myself, but I suppose it couldn't hurt either way. We're far enough along in our evaluations and it seems reasonably consistent to proceed with the final steps. Follow me."

As one, we stepped, out of the elevator and onto a solid foundation of rock, mostly granite from what I could tell. I traced my sights onto the glow rods fading into the distance as the path before us winded away. The sounds and the scents were soothing. The dense rock all around shielded us from enemies high above. Metal tracks were sunken into the bedrock in front. Some of the older, more worn-in tracks looked electro-mechanical while others were clearly MAGLEV. They curved with the path and disappeared into the farthest recesses. That was it: the carts riding these lines ferried the mineral ore and various precious metals upwards aboard the turbolifts, out the back side of Omega, down the docks and into the courtyard where they were palletized and prepped for interstellar shipment. The giant mound of dirt we climbed for air-dropped supplies and MEDEVAC was made

entirely of excess materials exhumed from these mines.

A noise caught my attention, a steady drip_. _Off to the side, droplets of water pooled both below and above. "Is it safe to drink?" I asked.

"Yes. Feel free to indulge." Doctor Kleiner assured, looking at as many Marines as he could before walking deeper inwards.

I walked up to a small puddle resting on a low shelf, stooped over the crude fountain, and scooped up a mouthful with my cupped hands. Before drinking, I covered my face in it, pressing it into my skin and rubbing away the salty sweat stuck to my eyelids. I took another scoop and fed it into my mouth, slurping and savoring its coolness as it soaked into my tongue. It tasted pure.

As I loitered for another few seconds at the fountain, I entertained the possibility of leaving my radio behind, yanking its encryption module and tuning the bandpass filter to accept all frequencies including civilian bands...in hope of listening in on anyone still out there seeking shelter. It was a foolish notion, I then realized an instant later. The device's diminutive amplifier couldn't hope to cut through all the dirt and rock and sintered Iron between me and the surface, and the amount of radiation between the TAC-Nuke and the glassing would surely do a traveling survivor more harm than good.

A brief pause and I was back on the move, pulling just behind Kleiner and the Gunny in front.

"This is the only region in the entire planet containing clay deposits and the clay layers reside at the surface. Thus, the aptly-named Foreclay Outpost. Geothermal vents below continually satisfy the clay layer above in its affinity towards plasticity. And where there is clay, there is Iron. Large amounts of it. Coupled together, the clay and Iron act as a natural Faraday Cage. Interleaved at varying depths, the layers above our heads are both conductor and insulator. Oh _yes, _you could say the process effectively screens out any electromagnetic probing the Covenant used to pinpoint us. Even with higher-intensity scans, the backscatter simply propagates into and around the planet's magnetic field lines and would only suggest that the returning signal comes from everywhere on the planet at once. This is why we _and _the device, were able to avoid detection for nearly six months. We readily exploited the thermal activity as a limitless power source as well, mainly used for the admin wings. The Omega Wing and other special sectors required more, reliable power."

The history lesson was intriguing. I was repeatedly drawn away from it by our surroundings. Doctor Kleiner became background noise as the path winded left, right, up and down—sometimes a combination of them. Traveling single file as only our path would allow, we each took our turns weaving between rocky protrusions. Low ceilings opened up to tall ceilings, and then back again. Wide, waist-high shelves glittered with microscopic crystals beneath the pools of water that collected there, shining like constellations in a night's sky. The deeper we proceeded the cooler the air became. The polypropylene suits were the only effective barrier against an all-out shiver. Alternate paths soon stemmed away from ours. Unlike topside, there were no signs to indicate destinations. Instead, Doctor Kleiner continually consulted the tablet in his grasp.

He stopped and scrutinized the display, pointed towards the right with a firm nod, the path gliding gently down a bit. "This way."

We each took our turns again, duck-walking under a low ceiling, only able to fully pass a mining cart contently. Only a half-meter partition of solid rock separated us from an unusually straight path with a much more comfortable head room to it. I sensed it was angled slightly down, maybe a five-degree grade. It felt good to let gravity take my feet for a change. The trek so far had felt more like a session of calisthenics. Flashbacks of boot camp physical conditioning raced through my mind. Burning muscles, evaporating sweat in a cool breeze and a drill sergeant seeking more misery for recruits.

We arrived at a large, circular intersection with many paths to choose from. Tracks from all directions led to this wide junction, all terminating in the center where a complex switching platform laid. Off to the side troubleshooting some electronic conduit was Hal Overton, dressed in the same grease-stained blue coveralls. This time he had a hard hat, gloves and knee pads. In his hand was the ubiquitous yellow plastic case of a Fluke digital multimeter.

"Say," Lawrence said, "didn't we see him back in the Omega Wing?"

"Yeah."

Lawrence regarded the technician one last time before we moved on. "Heavy maintenance guy with a clearance, how 'bout that."

Kleiner led us along a path just beside the one Hal occupied. Before we passed through the grand intersection, Hal paused his work to get a good look at Lima Company, nodded curtly like a colleague, then quickly went back to his maintenance duties. We passed through another low ceiling. Another few paces and we appeared onto a much wider lane with a very high ceiling, Mercury-vapor lamps recessed into the rock like the prying eyes of an apparition floating above.

"Ground's perfectly level." Holmes said.

And it had a single track for a mining cart stretching on into the dimming distance. Twin concrete sidewalks flanked either side of us.

"Must be the main service tunnel." the Gunny said.

"One of many." Kleiner announced over his shoulder.

"I think the air just got a little warmer." I said.

We were now adjacent to the concrete slabs as we walked. They stretched deep into lighted alcoves, the farthest recesses containing rows of free-standing shower heads over tiled flooring. At the edge of the raised slabs were a few aluminum sinks and lockers lined in rows. Duffle bags and running shoes and loose clothing articles were draped over wooden benches.

As one, Lima Company turned heads and looked at the slab to the other

side. Cots and sleeping bags were lined in rows as well.

"This," Kleiner said gesturing to the sides, "is our living quarters. Accommodating, considering we don't see the surface very often. You are welcome to make yourself at home, Marines. In fact, you might find a shower refreshing after all you've been through. I leave it up to you."

Gunny Smith nodded while glancing at all his troops.

"Yeah, I think we could all use a good cleaning up. I know I stink to high heaven."

"Very well." Kleiner said. "I'll come back in about an hour to resume our passage to the laboratory."

* * *

><p>"What do you think he's talking about?"<p>

I shook my head while donning the last piece of armor in my loadout, cinching the adjustment strap snugly against my torso. My polypropylenes were still immaculate despite all the damage they'd taken. Everything was in place. I took a seat next to Lawrence on the bench. Steam from the nearby showers was still propagating through the open-bay locker room and funneling upward toward exhaust vents leading to somewhere outside the large chamber.

"Hard to say. Civilians around here are awful coy. But I think we'll find out soon enough."

"Are you ready?" I heard the Doctor say as his footsteps got louder.

I turned around toward the main corridor and found the elderly civilian standing in the middle of the high-vaulted lane, waiting there with a smile on his face as if eager to chaperon the remainder of our stay. Only at this stage in our mission did he taken on this kind of enthusiastic demeanor.

"I think there's just a couple more people rinsing off, Doctor, and we should be ready in a few minutes."

We waited for the last wave of troops to dry and dress as others finished with their personal routines. My loadout was already squared away and I was starting to bore. I took advantage of the idle time, lit my first cigarette in three days.

I savored the flavor and the synthetic euphoria, albeit both were only brief, casual implements before someone nearby called, "Hey, Shakespeare, boat's leavin'."

The Doctor led us to a high-vaulted granite arch that led the changeover to a very wide chamber, this time with a ceiling just high enough to fit a man of average height. Rows and rows of cafeteria style tables took up most of the space, with a conveyor belt butted up against the far left wall. Further behind the serving line were cooking stations and revolving coolers much like one would see at a neighborhood buffet. In their clear windows were all varieties of imported fruits and vegetables and desserts. And further, the doors

of the galley where food prep took place. Far to the other side of the mess hall was the dish and trash line—a long conveyor belt laden with plastic trays and glasses and soiled silverware.

A wide set of double doors at the end took us further, this time to a small auditorium with its ceiling hewn high. Semicircular rings were carved right out of the rock and enveloped the room, cascading higher and higher until the farthest ring nearly met the ceiling. The sitting surfaces were polished smooth and simple cushions adorned them at regular intervals.

"Our briefing room." Kleiner said as he strode through.

This amphitheater was adorned with a podium and microphone as well as a PA system occupying all 'corners'. A holographic pedestal took up the floor space just about center stage.

We did not stop. Kleiner paced through as if on autopilot.

"What is all this?" Haze asked aloud.

"This is our Daily grind." Kleiner stated matter of factly. "We start our day like most people, only we wake up with briefings and spend our working hours in the lab."

"Is that part of the tour?" Smith asked.

"Absolutely is."

Once led past the auditorium, the Doctor then brought us to a narrow corridor, able to fit two men shoulder to shoulder. On either side was wire shelving filled with personal protective equipment. Hard hats, ear plugs, ballistic goggles, steel toed boots, lead aprons, welder's masks. Co-mingled on the shelves were exotic test instruments that were likely unrecognizable to anyone in Lima Company.

"It's like you live here." I heard the Gunny mumble.

Another low ceiling and we emerged on the other side, the grandeur of the site catching me and everyone else by surprise: a cavern of immense volume, hollowed out to look like an empty hemisphere. A generous ledge arced around the entire circumference of a vast lake in the center. It must've been at least a hundred meters in diameter. Murky water just a few feet away sucked up the light from all the glow rods and cast eerie reflections onto the rocky surfaces. The Doctor paused for a moment just outside the threshold to the chamber.

"Please watch your step, Marines." Kleiner cautioned. "This is the primary coolant sump for our nuclear reactor. It is quite hot, just a shade below boiling."

He resumed once again at a brisk walk.

Every footstep reverberated off the concave bulwark dome, so voluminous that I felt singular, as if Lima Company around me didn't exist. Far ahead and straight in line with our entrance was a white light. Not harsh or glaring, but soft and natural. Inside the light were men in white lab coats laboring in duties, just specs from our

vantage. Among them, barely distinguishable, was a tall military man in the whitesâ€”service dress uniform. I had almost missed him, like camouflaged Elites. He blended in well, but every few seconds, he didn't. He stood there, broad-shouldered, watching the laboritarians scurry about in their tasks. Gleaming in the light was the unmistakable silver sheen of a metal eagle as he turned our direction.

A Naval Captain.

The eagle insignia sat in the middle of his cap, glinting in its ambient light like a survival mirror even from this far away.

"What the hell is an oh-six doing here?" Struger blurted out.

"Well, we just entered the big leagues, now didn't we?" Holmes said almost absentmindedly as he stared straight on.

"What do you make of this, Holmes?" Haze asked.

The Corporal gazed off into the murky green abyss around us as he replied, "Usually, Captains in the Navy are out and about commanding warships or briefing Admirals on intelligence matters. Think about everything we've been through since our insertion into the Omega Wing. Think."

"Seems as though all this riff-raff is an intelligence matter." Haze fired back. "Of different sorts."

"Oh-six, huh?" Gunny Smith said over his shoulder from the lead. The familiar, tell-tale jest that we all knew crept onto his face in the form of a teeth-baring grin. "Then be on your best behavior, Marines."

We'd just about spanned a quarter-length of the giant lake's circumference in a two-element march, shoulder to shoulder and slowly, careful not to slip off the edge.

The light began to fade from view. My eyes took several seconds to adjust to the dim, almost dark of the glow rod panorama. I looked back and saw my friends, my Marines. One at a time, I gave a curt nod to Haze, Holmes, Lawrence, and Struger. They each replied in their own mannerismâ€”thumbs up or a tip of the helmet or an identical nod. I turned back to the front just as we came back into view of the light a few moments later, now within our grasp.

Our coming here was a fate in the making. I had the feeling something significant was going to happen as we approached the threshold. I just knew it.

11. Disappearing Act

****Disappearing Act****

The bare, unapologetic rock beneath our feet abruptly ended.

Seamlessly, it transitioned to a white, polycarbonate tile which reflected the intense fluorescent lighting above. My eyes fully

adjusted to the ambienceâ€”a laboratory of sorts. I'd never seen anything like it, obviously a facility on the cutting edge of science and technology. Towering from floor to ceiling at every wall were equipment chasses bolted to the deck with computing consoles and telecommunications equipment locked away inside each one of them. A slow pan across the breadth of the room revealed a flurry of blinking LED status indicators, twinkling on and off like the stars of a cloudy night. Bench stations with electron microscopes, high-reliability soldering stations, automated fusion-splicers and spectrum analyzers hummed as technicians operated them in their tasks. In a protected, cage-like enclosure twenty meters left was a bank of cryogenic tanks. A polyp of steel-braided lines blossomed from its top plate and snaked into a nearby wall. At the far end of the chamber was a blast incinerator, its safety grate taming the radiant heat from within.

"Busy in here." Haze murmured. "Very busy."

"Raised floor." Holmes said. "Cryogenics over there cool down all the equipment. We're standing on top of its ducting."

And just off to the right was another vault door much bigger than the one in Omega Wing. It could easily fit ten people shoulder to shoulder and two high. The grandeur of the room caught me off guard. We were face to face with a Naval Captain.

The Gunny called, "Room, tench-hut!"

We all snapped to attention and turned to statues. The Gunny snapped off a crisp one to the Captain for us. In turn, it was properly and promptly given back.

"Sir," Gunnery Sergeant Smith said, "Lima Company reporting as ordered."

The Foreclay Mining Outpost was getting stranger for every minute elapsed and more shadowy for every meter descended. Something important was happening in this laboratory. The amount of skilled labor taking place this moment was reason enough. If it wasn't reason enough, surely the Naval Captain standing in front of the largest vault I had ever heard of, was. "I wonder if we'll ever know what's happening here."

Holmes replied. "Well, apparently the only surprise left in store is to see what this device is."

"...Then we can get some shore leave." Haze said with a dry humor.

"At ease, Lima Company." the Captain ordered, stepping forth.

The field-grade officer in front was tall and lean with a proud and commanding posture about him, just like I envisioned Naval Captains to be. He smiled and swiped his cap off with one hand and tucked it in the crook of his arm, studying us briefly just as we did him. He wore a full head of light-brown hair, lined with solid grey around the edges. His face was chiseled, very much similar to Gunnery Sergeant Smith's. Like him, he appeared young, though weathered around the edges at the same time. At a distance, I might've mistook either one of them for the other, though the Captain's physicality

was certainly much less than that of our NCOIC.

"I am Captain Lawson, commanding officer of the Foreclay Outpost. Sorry for the cool climate. Make yourselves as much at home as you can before we leave."

The Gunny looked around the bustling laboratory, almost frozen with confusion. "Leave, sir?"

The Captain did not reply to the Gunny, but instead cast his perceptive gaze over to Doctor Kleiner who announced almost on cue, "Per protocol, I have not disclosed the full scope of the project, Captain. That includes egress."

"I think we can skip protocol for once, Doctor Kleiner."

The Doctor's brow furrowed slightly. "Lima Company still hasn't been given a proper demonstration, not to mention we haven't completed the remaining test and evaluation sessions."

"Well, what are you waiting for, Doctor? Show them."

Kleiner turned to us. "This way, Marines."

Kleiner strode to the vault door and produced a finger print and a retinal scan. Once his true identity was confirmed, he punched in a PIN on a mounted keypad. Then, with his entire weight, he thrust a huge lever lock counterclockwise. A braying hiss nearly robbed me of hearing as the door swung open on inward-facing hinges. All of Lima Company was motionless as Kleiner enacted his routine.

Haze gaited towards me just before the door reached maximum angularity. "Think you can pick _that _lock, Shakespeare?"

As we entered, scientists carried on with their tasks, oblivious to Lima Company and its new friends.

Lawrence looked all around at our new surroundings, satisfied that the mines were now a safe place, wholly human-controlled. He gladly let down his guard, proceeded to care for his favored rifle. He deftly unbuckled it, performing a drill-spec pirouette that would make a U.N. Color Guard Leader nod respect. He sealed the rubber dust covers over the top-mounted 3x scope with great care. Him and Haze still had a standing bet, but were unable to put the new BR-55 to the test just yet, maybe never. The Covenant would unlikely breach the Omega Wing and infiltrate the mines for all that we understood of this place. I felt Lawrence would win that bet. What the new Battle Rifle lacked in bullet barraging, it likely excelled with accuracy.

Struger was ahead talking tactics and techniques with the other rocketeers of Lima. He had the new BR-55 Battle Rifle anchored to his rucksack. Struger, the consummate heavy weapons professional, always took time out to make sure his weaponry was clean and in good working condition. He also had inscribed personal art on the rocket launcher since we entered the mines, did it while he walked. Holmes was just a few paces away, his arm healing nicely off hemostatic agents alone. It wouldn't be long before he was a strong rifleman again. Haze was far ahead, almost out of view. He was in better condition than before. Covenant glassing had a way of demoralizing entire planets. I

wondered how long it would take to finish their orderly, methodic criss-cross pattern of destruction.

At least now people like Gunny Smith and his immediate subordinates could let their minds occupy issues other than unit morale. Haze was back in the action again. It was all that mattered.

I was the last through the massive door. I looked back. The hinges whirred as the Captain saw us in and shoved the door closed.

Kleiner was once again our guide.

The corridor was dark, nearly pitch black aside from a few meek glow rods paving the way for us. But stranger than the surrounding darkness of this ultra-secure chamber was perhaps an even more humbled light. It covered the walls like an army of ants, teeming with docile business and a sense of socialism—a luminous community. I wouldn't have noticed it if I was still in the middle of the pack, but my attention was suddenly stolen by this. I wondered if anyone else took notice as I stole a moment for myself and ventured closer to a wall for a closer look. Something was different about these particular walls. I hadn't seen this display before anyone further above. These weren't simply crystals trapped within the rock; I saw a pattern emerging as I stared harder.

There were coherent symbols impressioned inwards, logic in their arrangements. There were spirals and dots and bars, squares and triangles. They were too precise, too evenly spaced—surely not anomalies. I bent even closer, my nose nearly brushing the sparkling surface. Suddenly, the characters seemed to blur around the edges and fade from my vision. They were moving in place. I blinked and stepped back ever so slightly, straining my eyes in the dark.

There they were again, back into focus.

Like a symphony of light, the symbols moved in unison. The rest of the team had already pressed further on and disappeared around a corner. Part of me wanted to follow, another part wanted to stay here and observe. This was completely outside of my experience. I peeled off a polypropylene glove from one of my hands, the sweat of my palms cooling in the ambient air. I risked a touch against the surface of the wall.

I set a finger down right on top of one of the symbols—a spiral mosaic that diminished into ever smaller curls, its curvatures fading seamlessly into bare rock. It was glass-smooth, strangely warming upon contact to my touch. I curiously switched on my helmet-mounted halogen light to see better in the dark, but it was barely any use. The glow fully reflected back in my face as if the symbol rejected foreign light.

I switched it off and the symbol had taken on a new luminosity of its own—a faint red, like metal heated in an open flame. From the center, the red bloomed outwards and spread into the arms of its spiral, warming to a pleasant orange, then brilliant yellow-gold.

From the depths of the rock, a new symbol appeared that hadn't been there before. It seemed conscious to input, alive. It emerged from the core, a triangle of pure white. I touched it and static sparked

between us. In the next instant, warm, radiant light raced to its surroundings and spread into the farthest foreseeable distance. Symbols exponentially materialized everywhereâ€”on all sides of the mine shaftâ€”until the entire corridor was alive with light and shadow. Even with full luminosity attenuation of my HUD, I still had to blink and squint.

For as far as I could see, the tunnel was alive.

I had initiated a chain reaction of whatever this was. I felt a tinge of fear as hairs started to stand on my body. But the only thing happening was lightâ€”pure, white light. My fear seemed squelched in an instant, insignificant.

I then remembered Homer's Odysseyâ€”how beautiful bird-like women enchanted sailors to their death with beautiful songs, much like this manifestation of light stole me now. Sirensâ€”they raised their sweet voices as ships passed by, causing sailors to become dazed, losing all recollection of their former lives. The wayward men were contented to waste away on the beach, continuing to listen in as the Siren's songs filled their ears...until the only thing left of them were their sun-bleached bones.

Lima Company was out of sight. I felt lost. Gunny Smith would kill me himself before any rock wall would if I didn't regroup with them soon.

I carried on in the same direction as earlier, before I found myself in this disorientation. I turned a corner and found a side-passage ahead with fresh footprints. Next, I managed to round the correct corner and sneak back into formation unnoticed, black spots swimming in my sights as I tried to adjust to the darkness we walked into.

At Struger's side, Doctor Kleiner was still giving Lima Company its due in-brief.

"It's really quite a shame that you all could not take a longer ganders at the lab facility. It's marvelous. It's the largest and most advanced workshop of its kind...ever built. The clean sectors are free of moisture and oxygen, of course. And we also house the largest static-free room, even though only a handful of people know this. Consider yourselves very lucky, Marines. The whole underground complex has been awarded every major ISO certification ever published. We've garnered several awards already, and if not for its secrecy, they would be published into the public domain.

"Maybe one day the scientific community by and large can enjoy its ammenties as we have. Ah, we have been blessed. But nonetheless, I digress from the real issues here. These facilities were built for one purpose, to study the device. And judging by the ignorance the Covenant has displayed so far, we can assume that whoever built the device was of a technologically-advanced society unrelated to the Covenant. Advanced far beyond our culture, beyond even the Covenant culture, beyond all reckoning!"

"Eli looks like he needs a breather to me." Struger said, glancing at me and thumbing toward the Doctor.

"Yeah, he's getting all worked up and all of us haven't even seen this little gadget yet."

But that was about to change. I could sense his own anticipation as he halted just outside a small, sturdy doorway. "This, Marines, is where our greatest discovery liesâ€¦just beyond this airlock."

"Never mind." Struger whispered. "We're here."

I looked the access way over. The doorway in front was merely two meters high, just enough to fit the tallest Marine in our group. And it was narrow, only able to accommodate one human at a time. Lights crawled over its surface, status indicators of pressure integrity and whatever else. They reminded me of the light show I saw further back in the corridor, though it was a synthetic mockery of the real thing.

But after everything I'd experienced in the outpost and in these mines, the door itself seemed to beckon as Kleiner waited for us to refocus our attention. It was likely my imagination, but it desired to be unlocked, as if entering might just define a life's existence. It was another hunch. Something strange and, perhaps wonderful, was through this ominous doorway. I was mere footsteps away from crossing through and making the discovery for myself, but maybe I was just miles away again, musing as usual.

The Doctor suddenly took on a new energy. The faint, glowrod reflection from his thick glasses barely masked his wide-eyed excitement. "Hold on to your helmets, Marines."

He opened the door and a tang of metallic air surged forth with a hiss, engulfing Lima Company with its coppery synthesis. The smell was altogether strange. The Gunny was first in, followed by Haze, Holmes, then me. Others behind me followed, but for some reason, I was no longer aware of how many Lima Company numbered at present. It was of lesser concern; and I didn't want to look back.

We entered single file down a short, dimly-lit corridor. Almost immediately after the entrance was an identical door to the left, thin and short. As if sensing our confusion, Doctor Kleiner said:

"Proceed to the end and take your seats, Marines." He held the outer door open until the last of us were in. The narrow hallway dead-ended about twenty meters in.

Approaching the end of the corridor per the Doctor's instruction, the right hand wall recessed further away by a couple of meters, giving room for rows of chairsâ€"staggered in ascending height. The left hand wall in front of the bleacher-like seating housed a section of plexi-plate glass, a small room on the other side of it, too dark to see. Our attention was redirected at the sound of Kleiner closing the outer door behind him once everyone was seated. He took two steps inward, turned towards the door off to the left and tapped in a command to a nearby keypad. A blast of air descended on him from ducting above, blowing his lab coat into waves. Lint and dust fell into metal grating below.

"We like to keep the resonance field as dust-free as possible." Kleiner said as the door opened. He walked through.

Within seconds, he was within our view beyond the plexi-plate transom—at least half a meter thick by my watch. Motion-sensing electronics in the room he occupied activated overhead lights, which gradually grew brighter until we could see the inside of it clearly. It was mostly empty, except for a single pedestal in its center. "Don't tell me we're up for another death-by-holo-pedestal-briefing again." Haze said.

"I think your assumption is wrong." Holmes answered.

The Doctor unhinged the top of this monolithic stand. His face lit up with exhilaration, incongruous to the character of a chief scientific figure.

From the inside, he pulled out a single object: a black ball, so black that I had to stare at it to believe it was real. Black as if it sucked in all the light around it, distorting the very air surrounding it. The sitting chamber was abuzz much like Omega Wing was before. Marines looked at one another as if they had explanations to offer. Others stared in disbelief just as I did. Struger in front of me was on the edge of his seat, marveling at whatever this thing was.

The Doctor cleared his throat, the hoarse sound resonating into our chamber a half-second later through a PA system in the corners. "This," he said absentmindedly, "represents the fruits of our labor." He glanced up through the plexi-plate and into our chamber.

"Who will volunteer to aid me in this demonstration?"

I heired on the side of caution this time and only looked around. A handful of Marines had their hands raised. Others were like me, testing the proverbial waters, wisely spectating.

"You there!" Kleiner pointed into the window pane. Struger stood up, his curious hand gesturing inward to himself. "...Yes, _you_."

Struger stepped out of the bleachers and towards the pressure door. "Lucky bastard." Haze mumbled.

Struger waited there for a moment at the threshold to the antechamber. The fierce draft from above procedurally cleansed him of dirt and dust, then the door opened. He stepped through.

I jostled around in my seat, wondering when he'd come back into view through the glass. There he was, nearly by Kleiner's side who was still at the stand in the middle. As Struger approached the Doctor, observing the black ball as best he could without interfering with Kleiner or the demonstration, we could clearly make out his confused face from the other side. "Doctor," he said with an overwhelming amount of curiosity in his voice, "what is it that I need to do?"

We all felt the same. The device was so strange and intriguing to look at, but I couldn't even fathom what it did. Not one soul here could except one civilian. As so many times before, Lima Company didn't have a clue what it was doing here.

"Nothing, Private. Do nothing. Now," Kleiner announced facing the spectators, his muffled voice crackling through the loudspeaker, "we

can begin the presentation. What I am about to attempt has been done many times before. All previous trials have been successful and there is no cause for alarm. Everything you are about to witness is perfectly normal."

Despite the calming words, we all knew something extraordinary was taking place here. He turned to Struger "on the other side of the pedestal. "What is your name, Private?"

"Jon Struger." he replied, his voice wavering with adrenaline.

The Doctor held the ball in the palm of one hand, manipulating the ball with the other, tinkering with its surface, all his concentration vested into it. The lines of his face hardened. He touched the device as one would a datapad. It then seemed to shimmer and haze the air. "And how old are you, Jon?"

"I'm twenty-three"

He disappeared.

12. The Fruits of Our Labor

****The Fruits of Our Labor****

The sitting chamber was on fire, aggravated with conversation "the sitting chamber was in total disarray. I couldn't truly describe the flux of reactions I was witnessing from others. I was too busy with myself, just trying to convince myself this was real. I broke free my mind from the chaotic expanse and realized my heart was racing. Calming thoughts couldn't even control my shaking. Every hair on my body was raised. I took a deep breath "yes. Struger disappeared. He vanished. He was gone.

The Doctor said this would be normal.

Was it?

I looked into the room he stood in on the other side. He exuded no particular reaction to what just happened. Apparently, it was normal. Struger's disappearance was what Doctor Kleiner had intended.

I took a harder look at the man. He simply stood there and observed the chaos through the window like a curious onlooker would at a caged group of animals.

I made a quick look around the room: I stood up, fighting for a good vantage point to see who was here. People were standing, ranting and raving and speaking nonsense. I knew Lima Company was better than that. Our discipline had got us this far. Though, this whole situation was nonsensical. What we just witnessed defied all logic, all laws of our universe. How could someone just disappear? I couldn't wait for the explanation.

Once I was able to stand tall enough, I saw that everyone "minus Private Jon Struger" was still here and intact. I half expected us to suddenly appear in another place, to wake up in another reality. It was then that I noticed the air was colder than before, my body shaking and surging with adrenaline. I brought my hands to bear,

seeing that my extremities became moist with sweat.

Struger instantly materialized back into the room next to Doctor Kleiner. All of Lima Company was in uproar again, the sudden spike in noise hurting my eardrums.

Shock was the subject of the room with no order to be had in our confusion. Lima Company Marines were too busy talking to one another, just talking crazy. God came up a few times. And I didn't bother to speak. It was of no use; the discussions made no sense. And I didn't feel like raising my voice just to ask what the hell was going on, as if any of us knew anyway. I waited for what seemed like half a standard hour for everyone to quiet down. I looked next to me at Holmes, who was just as shocked as I, and gave him a nudge of the elbow. "Holmes, what the Hell do you think?"

"I don't know, man. I literally don't even know what to say right nowâ€"

"I do." Haze said from a row further up behind us. "It's teleportation. They found out how to teleport with that black ball."

"It could be just a sham." Holmes said cautiously. "...that stand in the middle could be a sophisticated holographic manipulator."

"Now why would they drag us all the way down here for that?" Haze countered. "After all we've been through. I'm telling you: it is teleportation. That's why this place is so secretive. That's why an oh-six is running the show. _That's_ why we always got the run-around."

"And that's why it was worth two million lives and a planet." Lawrence added.

"I suppose you're right." I said, nodding my head stiffly. "I guess we'll wait to see what the good Doctor has to say."

"Yeah, if everyone would only get a hold of themselves." Holmes added.

So with that, I looked past the plexi-plate window againâ€"into the room on the other side. I looked at Klenier. He stood there with a certain look, a certain aura about himâ€"casual or all-knowing. A sly smirk and a careless posture, he waited patiently for the Marines to quiet down. Struger next to him was in awe, speechless, pawing at his clothing and checking himself for any 'defects'. And to my utmost surprise, he had none. The Doctor successfully teleported him to somewhere outside the room and then back again.

Amidst the proverbial magic show, something else tugged at my mind again. Just like beforeâ€|

Amy.

It would have to wait. I was certain she was safe somewhere in the mines. Somewhere.

One by one the Marines took their seats again and quieted down, but the air was still the same. The chamber was still abuzz. Everyone was

on the edge of their seats, the entire room electrified with anticipation and wonder. We were hungry for explanation.

About half a minute went by with Doctor Kleiner's gaze frozen to the ground as if for dramatic effect.

"I think the good Doctor gets a kick out of his little spiel." Haze said to me.

Doctor Eli Kleiner somehow sensed the teeming stillness of the sitting chamber. In perfect silence, he took one step towards the stand in the middle of the room, Struger backpedaling in accordance, wide-eyed and shaken. Rather than putting the black ball inside the stand where it supposedly resided at all times, Doctor Kleiner instead placed it on top—"resting it for all to see. It pulsed with pure darkness, splotches of black brimming and churning with nothingness. It was the strangest thing ever to look at, but so pleasing as well like man's primordial attraction to fire, so instinctively alluring. It begged to be held and used. He held out an outstretched palm towards it.

"This," the Doctor said executively, "is the Singular-Point Field Effect Manipulator."

His posture touted straighter until the Captain uttered over the loudspeaker, "_Just call it the Transit. That's what I do_."

"My God," the Gunny said, "how does it work?"

"We don't actually observe the underpinnings by which it is able to calculate resonance gaps between the smallest forms of matter-antimatter interactions, but that is our theory." Kleiner replied. He turned towards the plexi-plate to face us. "It's a mystery we haven't solved...yet. However, a brilliant team of quantum cryptographers along with the help of our A.I. has been able to successfully interface with it and make it operable. You see, teleportation has always been possible mathematically, but we haven't evolved enough to possess the kind of innovation it takes to produce something like this, much less fully understand it. Thank whatever it is you believe in that we stumbled upon it. And once we did, rapid-fire successes occurred. Once we proved feasibility of its operation in a controlled environment, we brought it straight to developmental test and evaluation in a real-world setting. We've conducted several relocation trials already. First it was individual atoms, then tea cups laying around the office. Once we felt comfortable with it, we moved on to bigger objects like computer terminals, and now people."

"So we were your final test subjects." The Gunny said. "Cool."

Even despite the Gunny's typical humor I could see that something didn't quite sit well with him. I noticed it instantly after he swallowed a hard lump in his throat, then checked his shaking hands an instant later. I had never seen him so stirred. But his nervousness was warranted. I was a little nervous too. The strategic implications in the mere discovery of this device were huge, literally galactic. If the Covenant ever got their hands on this, they could win the War in the cosmic blink of an eye. We had to deny them this thing at all costs. It was now a weapon system.

I hated to say that the countless deaths of Zagosa citizensâ€”soldier and civilianâ€”was justified. But that's the way it was panning out.

I peered through the plexi-plate and took in its massâ€”so tinyâ€”able to fit in the palm of my hand. So many dead over so small a thing. The world above was likely smoldering cinder because of it.

"This is simply amazing." Gunny Smith said, staring ahead. "_The most amazing thing ever. This is what you were hiding all along."

"Yes." the Doctor replied.

The jet-black orb just sat there, motionless. Though its shape had undeniable solidity, it appeared as though the perfectly round sphere swam into itself, churning, a void that pulled in Lima's collective gaze.

"I wondered for the longest time," the Gunny said, fixated on it, "why they sent us here to a dilapidated, old mining facility. I thought the Covenant was on a wild goose chase or they were just trying their hand at random genocide again. But I can't believe you're actually teleporting things!"

"Yes," the Doctor said, "ever since the Covenant arrived, we acted under the assumption that there would be no more UNSC at Zagosa Prime. In fact, our orders specified the continuity of operations long after Zagosa Prime was glassed. It was just another disaster scenario in the books for us. And now look...It's a reality. It's as the Old Russian proverb says, isn't it? 'Plan for the worst, hope for the best.'"

"In-fucking-deed." Smith said, taking his seat again.

Haze stood up, looking the Doctor squarely in the eyes. "What are you going to do with this?"

"Use it against the Covenant."

"So then, we're leaving." the Gunny said resolutely.

"Soon..." Kleiner corrected. "First, we need to fuel it."

"Fuel it?" the Gunny asked, his head cocked to one side.

"Yes. As versatile as the device is, it requires tremendous energy to teleport objects. We've saturated it many times with all the microwave energy we could muster, but it drew so much current that our prime power plant wasn't enough to sustain it. We were forced to tap into our geothermal reserves to continue testing. It inadvertently knocked out all power to the admin wings of the facility as a result."

"Wait...as we moved towards Omega Wing, the power in the halls got knocked out. We had assumed it was the Covenant in the vents. We thought they hit the mains or something."

It was in fact the scientists, trying to infuse energy into the

power-hungry Transit. Everything made sense now.

"No, I'm afraid it was our doing." the Doctor admitted. "A necessary risk."

A look of clarity flashed in the Gunny's eyes. "Obviously."

"I can do two more volunteers." Kleiner announced with a wily grin.

The Captain cut in remotely over the loudspeakers, "_Two more and then we have to make ready to leave, Doctor_. _We're barely on-schedule_."

"Very well, Captain. Now—who would like to try it out?"

Haze stood up, eager to experience the impossible truth of teleportation. "What if you're wrong one time and you teleport half my body into the ground? What then?"

"It was intelligently designed in consideration to the operator's bidding." Kleiner rebutted. "It has never failed. Every test session has yielded precise, consistent results. It will never transpose foreign molecules with that of your own inert form. There was an intuitiveness in mind with the original design of this device as if it can surmise your wishes. In layman's terms, all the guess work is taken out."

"Hmmm." Haze thought it over as he stepped to the pressure door—about twenty meters out left. The pneumatic blast from above systematically cleansed him of debris. "Why do you like to keep it so clean in there?" Haze asked, needing more reassurance.

"We still haven't determined the extent of ambient scattering created by field displacement. Micro-interaction of 'life-sized' particles in the plane of transfer still has the possibility to affect our mass-displacement characteristics."

"How about that in Layman's terms, Doctor?"

"It means we're not taking any chances until we're forced to."

"Well, that's good to know."

Haze took an explosive breath and stepped into the room. The door slid closed behind him momentarily. A few footsteps and he was back into view through the plexi-plate. He took his place next to Struger and situated himself on the other side of the pedestal from the Doctor, who once again picked up the Transit and started to caress its shape, Lima Company ready for something amazing again. He poked at it and danced his fingers atop. We waited again for a friend to vanish and return.

"Just one volunteer?" the Doctor asked. "No one else? Then I guess Jon gets to go again. How about it, Jon. You ready?"

He nodded his head, taking a deep breath.

Kleiner jabbed the sphere once with an index finger.

They both appeared on the other side of the plexi-plate, instantly facing the front row of Marine spectators. A few of the men jolted in surprise and a few even reared backwards in their seats. There was a murmur in the crowd much like before.

"Two transfers at the same time." Holmes noted aloud, nodding his head thoughtfully.

"This thing could really make a difference in battle." The Gunny replied aloud.

Marines left their seats and went up to Struger and Haze, patting their hands on their uniforms to see if anything had changed about them, asking them what it felt like. After a few minutes of this, something caught our attention. Something far away. Something we were all trained for. Silence once again had a hold of us. We listened again.

A subtle vibration, soft like thunder. A distant booming, concussive as wardrums. Eerie calm before a storm.

"_Doctor! Get the Marines out of there right now! Commence the final phase of Project Gateway!_"

The booming stopped and the gentle tremor ceased to exist.

"What's going on?" the Gunny asked, wide-eyed. "Have the Covenant broken inside?"

"See for yourself." Doctor Kleiner said, holding his tablet high above his head.

It displayed real-time footage of security cameras high above the Omega Wing lobby where we once subsisted in perfect safety. The North wall that adjoined a break room I had once visited was completely demolished. Through smoke and chunky debris, hordes of Covenant creatures were pouring through. Blurs of purple and green and deep blue pushed through the rubble, traversing the beautiful obsidian. Their footsteps tarnished the Wing. And following close behind the initial assault wave was the disconcerting sight of multi-faceted blurs scurrying towards turbolifts. Special operations Elite commandos were pure motivation skilled, cunning and relentless. Escape them or die fighting them the only choices ever afforded a Marine.

I was fixated on the impossible displayed in Doctor Kleiner's tablet. Night sky cleaved its presence through the breach in the wall and unveiled splotches of oval-shaped light in the clouds. Covenant cruisers hundreds of them. And beyond the mammoth gash in the once-permanent bulwark was a giant, mechanized creature crawling over endless fields of glass. A large aperture of some sort was mounted above. It glowed a bright-green, surely responsible for the destruction.

The Doctor ran back into the static-free room and retrieved the Transit, and ran out faster. "That was a scarab. We've received Intel reports of them before. They are always bad news. We must leave now."

"Where's Amy?" I asked.

Kleiner opened the outer door. He turned, found my eyes amidst Lima Company. "She's already waiting for us at the Lambda Complex. We have to move!"

He pushed past and ran for the corridor. We followed.

13. The Flight to the Core

****The Flight to the Core**
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We once again ran for our lives, combat boots wildly crunching into the bedrock, spinning up rooster tails of dust and chaos into the glowrod darkness. Doctor Kleiner was undeniably in the lead, his white lab coat flapping into the unknown ahead. Suit and weapon lights frantically oscillated side to side against the indiscernible floor. Pretty soon, we were all out of breath. But we didn't dare stop. We rounded a corner, hastily checking all directions for trouble as we blasted through the intersection after Kleiner's lead. To the right was the laboratory where we met Captain Lawson. To the left was the Lambda Complex.

"What about the other scientists?!" I shouted, immediately sucking in air with the footstep.

"We can't worry about them!" Kleiner shouted back, not missing a single stride.

I instantly thought about Amy, wondering if she'd made her escape too. I could barely see my own boots as I sprinted. I activated night vision and green bodies scurried as fast as they could through the ambient dust in a straight bee line after Kleinerâ€"leading us to what I assumed was our final destination.

"Is this place safer than Omega?!" I shouted.

"Better than Omega!" He yelled, "Just don't stop running!"

I sprinted harder. The lactic acid had already started to accumulate, much fiercer than times before. We'd tire out with our loadouts and our current fatigue level. I glanced over my shoulder, past Marines. "How much farther?!"

My legs burned and were starting to lame out, but it was impossible to slow and allow the Covenant to outpace me. It all came down to a choice.

"We must get to the Lambda Core!" Kleiner shouted, not even looking back. His shape started to grow smaller as I stopped and doubled back for someone who'd tripped and fell. He was kneeling on the ground, panting. I rushed to his side and my joints seared in pain with the sudden deceleration.

"Get up!"

He lifted his head, gritted teeth and grunted in pain as I wrenched him up by the forearm.

We followed after everyone's steps in an instant.

Coming into focus through my sweat-drenched eyes was a cluster of autonomous loading vehicles, mining carts and personnel transports. Rather than utilize them, Kleiner hooked sharp right up ahead. His lab coat shone like a signal flare in the intense white light from above just as he disappeared from sight. One by one, Marines reluctantly followed him in this new direction—a narrow corridor. About five meters wide, it was just large enough for warthogs or pairs of mining carts. We pumped and pumped and pumped our legs down this hallway, a set of short stairs not even a stone's throw away. Kleiner was first up, waving his badge in front of a scanner. It lit up green and he threw it open as fast as he could, its metal bulk slamming into the adjacent wall with a bang. He stood there holding the door open, frantically waving us in.

Haze shouted, "There were warthogs back there!"

"Get in!" the Doctor shouted, overriding any doubt we had.

I was the last to reach the entryway, reaching the small flight of steps in front of me. I put all my will into my useless legs, skipping steps as I applied my last burst of energy. The noise became clear—yelps and barks and rabid screams bouncing off the walls off the intersection outside, searing my ears. They were upon us, shadows bouncing up and down and bearing closer. I dove past Kleiner and through the threshold. Darkness enveloped me.

I found myself on the ground in a dark hallway an instant later. I rolled over and looked back at the door. Kleiner then slammed it shut with all his might and quickly entered a sequence into a nearby keypad. Then, a faint, weary smile came across his face, which put me at ease. A chime echoed just as a thick slab of metal slid into place, making the view in the window opaque. I then let the burning take full effect on my numbed muscles.

"Keep moving!" Kleiner shouted.

His renewed sense of urgency spurred us all on and we flinched after him, jogging down this narrow hall. It was now a series of corridors much like the Admin sectors—only much more cramped. But to my thankful surprise, it led directly down to a set of wide, glass doors at the foot of a stairwell. Stenciled in red were the words that gave comfort: Lambda on the left door and Complex on the right.

I let out a sigh.

The Doctor swung them open.

We stepped through on his lead and found a grid-like arrangement of office cubicles. Computer terminals, printers, phones, desks. Kleiner proceeded a few paces to a door frame at the far wall where all the other Scientists had gathered at a low-vaulted room. The walls were a thin, green tarp that pulsed in waves with every undulating air current.

"We're inside a tent?"

Thin, metal benches were set up along the perimeter on which

rackmount communications hardware sat, all of it active. Every scientists we'd regularly or irregularly seen was here, manning these communications consoles, typing commands, re-configuring cables and more business-like than ever. As every time before, they paid no mind to us.

We entered through another door at the far sideâ€”

â€”and were now in another room just as small, no tent this time, but solid steel walls. Cables slithered their way through an adjoining port and fanned out into a series of high-gain amplifiers. Waveguides shot up from these and disappeared into the ceiling at the edges of the room. It was some sort of signal bunker, that much I gathered.

We poured through another heavy door at the far side...

Now before an immense room, much bigger than any other room during our entire stay at the Foreclay Outpost. We were dwarfed. Not only by the sheer size, but by the humming of the massive machinery ahead. Deafening was the sound as we were face to face with a large reactor. Steel girders held the towering hulk upright and in place as they faded away high above where they attached to the high rock walls with fasteners that appeared as large as human limbs. A wide concrete slab led to the foot of this powerplant.

Caught in its deep shadow was Captain Lawson.

He was not alone.

Two Spartans stood beside him.

Lima Company stared at the trio currently conversing amongst themselves, unaware of our entrance.

We waited for Doctor Kleiner to take action as everyone who's just arrived caught their breath. I looked around in the spare time. It was old and decrepit, thin layers of dust caked on every surface. The facility hadn't seen housekeeping in a long time, but the reactor hummed. Scientists were still further aft, still tending to the room full of communications equipment. Doctor Kleiner walked towards the reactor after a few deep gasps for air, brushing past Captain Lawson and the Spartan pair. It was then that they turned around and noticed us. Kleiner strode up to some sort of receptacleâ€”a small box about waist high with a small window. A trio of large-diameter tubes fed into this receptacle, two on the sides and one entering the top. He unscrewed a large cap that was just big enough to pass the volume of the Device he held. As he returned to us, he gave a nonchalant thumbs up to the Captainâ€”who nodded back.

The Doctor walked over to a nearby lever half-sunken into the floor and threw the large breaker switch. The hum of the reactor instantly rose higher in pitch. He wasted no time, spinning on a heel and marching to the wall at our left. It towered high above, curving to meet the other walls at the apex above. Blue powder-coated steel girders shot out from the reactor chassis at various points, bending at precise locations, terminating into the walls with sturdy bolts. Against this base of this wall were lots of suits, heavy and reflective. He took one off a rack and slowly donned it, flipping up his opaque visor so we could see his face. Once situated, he

approached us, walking straight to the Gunny. "Wait here."

He proceeded back into the signal bunker, disappearing behind the stout, steel door.

Immediately after, Captain Lawson went through the motions himself, donning this protective ensemble, retaking his place by the Spartans' side.

"What in the...What is happening?!" Haze asked. "What the hell are these guys doing?! This is a dead-end area!"

Fellow Marines were just as incredulous, a stir propagating throughout our loose formation a few seconds later.

"All that doesn't matter!" The Gunny yelled, looking at us all dead in the face, "Keep your shit together!"

We looked so out of place just milling around in an uncoordinated gaggle, nothing to do, bizarre to how we were trained. Captain Lawson soon took notice and left the two super soldiers to converse with each other.

"Gunnery Sergeant," he said, "while we're here, why don't you have your Marines get into spacesuits. You're going to need them where we're going."

"Aye, sir." the Gunny replied. "You heard 'im, Lima. Get to it."

What was being asked of us was again more strange than the victory we tasted at the North side. Lima Company followed the Gunny and congregated near a wall, suiting up into these heavy, bulky VAC suits. Suddenly, Captain Lawson brought a tablet to bear. His device was exactly like the one Kleiner had all this time, and he scowled at it. I knew whatever he was surveying could not be a good thing.

I was the closest Marine within arm's distance to him so he grabbed me by the shoulder. "Private, get in that bunker and tell Kleiner he needs to move his ass!"

"Yes sir!" I snapped to and started out at full speed, pushing Marines out of the way, knowing the Covenant would completely infiltrate the Lambda Complex in seconds the moment they broke through.

I plowed through the frame of the outer steel door and sped past the green waveguides fingering their way into the ceiling. I plowed through another door, appearing into the tent. Scientists were scrambling around the room. Their footsteps pattered around the tarp floor, a stench of sweat and fear in the air. It was the first time I had ever seen them notice me, their worry finally overt. For a split second, I wondered how much safety the Captain and the Doctor promised them.

Kleiner was at a nearby console as I rounded the corner of a large equipment chassis.

"Doctor, the Captain says you need to hurry. I think the Covenant are breaking through."

"Yes, I know." He handed me his tablet. I peered into its screen: the Covenant had started using plasma torches on the thick outer door—the one I had dove through. That slab of steel was at least a quarter-meter thick, but it wouldn't hold forever with that kind of hack. "You should go back to the reactor room, Private. We have to stay behind for just a little longer."

"Why, Doctor?"

"We need to compile and save all the data over the last few hours so we can take it with us."

"Doctor, forget the data. We have everything we need."

"I have a slipspace probe silo in the reactor room that I need to upload this data into! If we get cornered and can't escape, other commands need to know what happened here! I need a moment. You, go!"

The Doctor was sweating as he glanced at the datapad. The plasma torches of the Covenant mob were just about to fully pierce the outer door to the Lambda Complex.

"You have precious, little time, Marine. Everyone," the Doctor shouted, "finish what you can right now and prepare all your data. Get into the bay and get into suits. We leave now!"

I then ran back to the reactor bay, which had taken on a new light. Through the window that the tiny Transit resided in was a powerful, sapphire glow. It illuminated the whole area with pulsing arcs of light casting onto all surfaces of the room. All of Lima Company and what was left of Sierra Company were now fully suited up, occasionally glancing at the glowing orb. Scientists poured out of the door, scurrying into the bay, followed by Hal Overton who quickly disrobed his blue, grease-stained coveralls and made for a spacesuit.

The light within the cavity cradling the Device faded and disappeared with one last subtle flash. The Transit had undergone a metamorphosis while inside. Its shape and size were the same—still the tiny, black sphere. But under the perfectly dark surface was an iridescent chromate sheen barely visible, like there was another entity residing at the core. The Doctor plucked it away and immediately began his procedure, poking at it and sliding his fingers at specific points across its surface. Before all of Lima Company reconvened into a tight group around the Captain, I saw Kleiner, the Gunny and his next-in-command residing a few paces distant, barely out of earshot. They spoke over a private channel in their thick, leathery suits. In the next instant, Kleiner paced away from them and toward us, his head bowed down and avoiding any eye contact.

I then caught the side of Staff Sergeant Rios' face as he threw up a swift, rigid salute to Gunnery Sergeant Smith, his posture straight and proud.

It was odd to see an enlisted member salute another. Such customs were only required when acknowledging officers' presence. Nevertheless, one could render this respect to someone out of sheer admiration and that's what this currently was. Rios held his salute

there until his superior formally returned it, and then the look on the subordinate's face was one that I took for something that signaled dread. Difficult to say from this distance.

Staff Sergeant Rios turned our direction and approached without the Gunny following behind.

"I have a little announcement, Marines." Gunny Smith broadcasted.

Silence followed.

"The Doctor informs me that the Transit lacks the juice needed to get us all out of here."

"What's going on, sir?" Haze asked, wide-eyed. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying someone needs to stay behind."

"Some_one_?"

"Yes."

"Just one person."

"Yes, Private."

None of us knew how to respond to that.

A few people left behind to confront the impending assault would be acceptable, but to do it all alone was inconceivable. We'd come this far in our mission, and it was almost done, but once again we were reminded that there would always be a price paid for the cost of victory.

"Lima Company..." Gunny Smith said aloud. He turned to face us as he began removing his helmet. Unmasked, he gazed upon every face in the room with zero regret visible in his eyes. "The data archives in the other room need to be destroyed along with everything else here. The Doctor has viral scavengers in place, but the Covenant will get here before the job is done, and they cannot have access to that information. You will go on. You will live to fight another day. I'm staying here to see it gets done."

"Gunny," Haze said, "I'll stay here with you."

"No, you're getting out of here, Private. All of you are." Smith looked on at as many faces as he could. "Only one person needs to stay, and we need as many people fighting as we can, so just carry on, okay?"

The sincerity started to show, now audible in the Gunnery Sergeant's voice as well.

He quickly shoved vulnerability to the wayside seconds later.

"Only one has to stay, right? That's the Doctor's orders. Might as well be the Gunny. Hell, I'm getting too old for my liking anyway."

He finished with a hearty smile, that typical jest outshining his eyes.

But none of us were humored as so many times before.

Anything else going on in the room was immaterial as I watched and listened.

"Don't be fools thinking you can stay here and overcome what's headed this way. Just do me one favor and pay a visit to my family and tell them about what we did here, about what we did for other worlds."

He turned from us and faced the signal bunker—"where the Covenant hordes would inevitably flow from.

I stole a glance at the Doctor's tablet. The last arc from a plasma torch winked off and relinquished itself to the darkness of the Lambda Complex. Shadowy, blurred figures pushed down the door and spilled forth the very next instant. I could hear the impacting thump echo from beyond as the ravenous flood gushed through the corridors, spreading into all the tributaries of the Lambda Complex like an inexorable plague. They were on their way.

A movement occurred among us, gradually catching on. Charging rods where yanked back in succession and subsequently slapped forward. Various troops readied their rifles in preparation to join the Gunny for the final, proper send-off, but the Doctor quickly stifled our actions.

"Marines, you can't move. This might not work if you make any movements." Then there was a heartfelt pause from him before muttering, "...I'm sorry."

Unfazed, Gunny Smith tossed the heavy helmet on the floor by his feet, unsheathing a shotgun from his rucksack. His wide, square jaw could be seen widening from behind as he smiled while feeding rounds into the receiver. Smiling steadfast as if returning home from a two-year tour, smelling his long-awaited local cuisine, watching his children laughing in the fields of his estate, which ever planet that was on.

I viewed the Doctor's tablet once more. Was this really about to happen?

"Don't move, please!"

The arms of the collective monster effused into the offices, closer and closer. From this distance, through this heavy suit, I could hear them coming. The sick, twisted music. The creatures of the Covenant were here. Grunts were always the first to go in and the flood gates were opened. Bodies pinged against the metal walls just ahead as they boxed one another out to be the first at a taste for our blood.

"Do not move!"

The Gunny stood straighter, holding his head up high and proud as he spoke into TEAMCOM, uttering into our ears:

"In the Draco III resistance, it was considered a high honor to face down a Covenant death squad, to stall them as much as you could.

You'd be remembered because you did your soldierly duty. The highest honor was to look them in the eye and smile right before the Grunts and Jackals tore you to pieces."

I couldn't believe this was happening. I was powerless to stop it.

I felt Gunny's pride in that moment, that unflinching bravado. His posture and his determination as he started off into the signal bunker alone with his weapon drawn seemed as though it could never be exhausted.

"Well, I'm smilin', Marines."

"Give 'em hell, Gunnery Sarge!" Rios shouted, fist-thumping at his chest.

"Don't move!"

Gunnery Sergeant Smith stepped beyond the threshold. There were slug rounds immediately, violently discharged. One after another. There was only a brief couple of seconds of silence before a tremendous explosion from ahead nearly rocked me off my feet, then before the fireball could engulf Lima Company the Lambda Core disappeared from my sight in a brilliant, white flash.

14. Far Side of the Moon

****Far Side of the Moon****

A thousand cries rang in my head.

The sudden, luminous flash forced my eyes shut.

They opened and the noise instantly faded along with the artificial glow.

The view had changed in front of me. Gone were the harsh lights of manmade facilities and gone was the omniscient dim of the mines far below. No more tunnels and twists and turns, the incredible secrets around each dark corner.

We stood together in a broad, plagioclase plain, a grey-white panorama. Jagged and rocky in some places and smooth dust in others. An ankle-deep layer of silvery, talc-fine powder swirled around everyone's boots and was thrown into the ambiance from the instantaneous displacement of us—"combatants and non-combatants"—all indistinguishable and anonymous behind polarized face plates. The far away star lit up the ground like a mirror and reflected a pale, pleasant glow upwards. Mountains at the far horizon spewed molten chunks high in the air like otherworldly fountains.

"We're on the moon, Marines." Kleiner broadcasted. "Zagosa Majoris."

I looked up: black was a sky in front, vast and open, a wonder of colors filling the void.

As if hive-minded, the group reluctantly began walking on Kleiner's

lead.

We carried on for miles. A splash of stars dotted the dark velvet of space. One-sixth gravity and power assist made it easy despite this perilous terrain. The barks, the screams and howls, and the humming of machines had long since faded from my mind, but something else inside still shouted. Everything changed. We had skirted death once again, only this time we were thousands of miles away from any danger. The change was welcomed, though the silence and stillness of space was somewhat disconcerting after everything that had transpired.

I stammered along with the pack as we traveled with the rotation of the moon, which was perpendicular to that of Zagosa Prime's own spin axis. The mechanical whir of my oxygen pump began to still my thoughts the longer I walked. I looked on ahead, dreaming of Gunnery Sergeant Smith faithfully leading us at the point of formation as usual.

Throughout the moonscape, trench-like troughs or impassable rock faces loomed over the area around our snaking path. Up and over gentle foothills we slowly marched. Wisps of dust curled around us as we carried on. A small outcropping of rock stood higher than the surrounding bluffs. I broke free of the group for a moment and stood upon its highest vantage point, scoping the terrain, sighting it out for miles. Pockmarked plains stretched on until they terminated at the horizon, perhaps spanning even farther beyond my sight. Sheer cliffs and unfathomable craters dotted an area far to my East, casting out as far as the eye could see. The terrain was either jet-black or high silver, deep shadows or harsh light. A treacherous and humbling domain.

I caught up to the rear of the group as Kleiner and Lawson ventured further on. The foothills soon settled into a downward slope and lead into a shallow basin. The ground was cracked and split, possibly the sign of a water channel residing here eons ago. A vertical drop loomed ahead, merely five meters down, giving way to a field of high stones and helmet-sized potholes, an isolated meteor shower site. We landed through, traversing another kilometer. For some unknown reason, a wave effect progressed through the line of people and I sidestepped ten meters to the left, navigating out of the path leading into a deep trough—which eventually became a profound ravine, its destination a mystery as it faded into bottomless shadow. On this plateau we strolled. Mountains that were once far were looming closer, humiliating us, their molten lava the only color to behold.

The silence of hard vacuum did nothing to bring ease as we passed under the shadow of a lunar precipice towering high above our heads. The light was shunned away for a moment as we passed under. Far below this ceiling was a gap in the path, which upon more time and decreasing distance became a sheer hundred-meter plunge into darkness. We hugged a wall, traversing a slim ledge leading up to this drop. Around us, a shadowed panorama with monolithic stones thrust up from the depths like foresaken souls desperate to escape their eternal purgatory. Single file, we pushed off and floated over the yawning chasm. Fresh sawtooth boot treads beat each other up as Marine after Marine after scientist jumped across and landed into more dust on the other side.

Far ahead in the light gleamed a crater of glass. I looked on and caught the inside of the far rim—half in shadow. The depression was lined with the green glitter of Iridium and the pinkish-red hue of shocked quartz. We pressed closer until we were face to face with the crater's ledge. It dove deep into the ground. Lying far below was a tremendous object of exact shape, impossible to have been left there by the will of the cosmos. Vaguely rectangular, its only camouflage was the wide, deep-shadowed basin it lied in. At the far end of this lengthy block, I could make out a series of circular rings—the fluting of rocket engines—conical in shape. A UNSC starship, medium tonnage by my estimation. We peered over the rim of the immense bowl. The parabolic walls of the canyon tapered into the wide floor.

"Follow me." said the Doctor.

He pushed off the ledge, gliding softly down into shadow. We followed.

After about a moment of one-sixth freefall, I landed gently into a thick layer of dust.

Vision was totally obscured after the gentle impact.

The entire group waited a moment for the haze to dissipate. I then looked up. Only the faintest rays of cosmic light crested the lip of the crater, a half-halo materializing above us once the dust rose enough. I activated my night vision and panned around the bottom. Directly ahead was the ship. A few paces away and we collectively came face to face with this Titanium-clad hulk. Painted on the side in white, block lettering was THERMISTICLES.

Doctor Kleiner held up a remote transceiver between his thumb and forefinger, activating the device. The Starboard airlock slid open on command, a slice of light pouring out onto the ground. A mix of Marines and scientists began to enter single file, cycling through by the dozen. I looked up into the sky again and was struck by the sight of Zagosa Prime coming into view inside the crater's wide cone of visibility. A flush of red tickled the distant planet's horizon, slowly enlarging as it rotated my way. Full view would occur in a matter of minutes.

More and more Marines and scientists piled in while I lingered in silence, my gaze glued straight up. All the vertebrae in my neck began to ache, the pain intensifying the longer I watched.

"Curious to see the aftermath?" the Doctor's voice emanated through my headset. He had a strange tone. He posed the question as if the dying world was a specimen under study rather than a place we called home.

I looked over to him as I answered. He was already looking at me, though both of our visors were polarized nearly an opaque-black.

"Yeah."

He strolled towards me, taking a stance by my side. "I am too."

A moment of silence lingered as more of Zagosa Prime rotated into

view. We gazed together.

"I was sorry to see Sergeant Smith go." the Doctor said flatly. "He seemed like an excellent Marine, and an even better person."

"Yeah."

I had only known the Gunnery Sergeant for a few weeks, and I found myself readily agreeing with Kleiner. The realization hit home that I would never see the man again. I glanced sidelong at the Doctor, wishing I knew how to thank him for everything he'd done. Because of his genius, Lima Company cheated death.

It wasn't perfect. Nothing ever is.

We still lost too many Marines down there.

And losing Gunny Smith was still unthinkable.

"Thanks for getting us outta there when you did. I'm not sure I could've handled seeing him go down."

"It was the least I could do for Lima Company." Kleiner replied as the sky tinged redder by the second. "You know, I spent a lot of time down there in the mines of that planet. I hardly got to enjoy its surface. What's left of it looks peaceful from here. But I suppose all that will soon perish as well."

More of the Covenant's bombardment began to show as we waited, until after another moment the entire view was blood-red.

It now waned three-quarters full. Zagosa Prime had died.

Nevermore would it be the green and blue and white that I once knew.

"You think there's any hope for Zaragosa, Doctor? I mean, if we win the War?"

"With enough time and resources, a planet can be brought back to life. I'm sure of it. There's an entire field of academia dedicated to planetary resurrection. Whether or not we'll ever get to see their theories realized, well, it'll be up to us."

"Yeah, I remembered about a decade ago reading an article in _Popular Science _that terraforming scientists and environmental engineers formed a galaxy-wide community of practice dealing with the after-effects of glassed worlds."

"Phytoremediation has come a long way." Kleiner offered the conversation. "If we're patient, nature can do most of the work for us while the inner worlds are rebuilt."

There was always hope. Only the surface was destroyed. The planet within was still churning.

But there was never any time to undertake such efforts with the War going on. Just another concept on the drawing board, waiting.

Now, Zagosa Prime was completely aflame, bright as an elderly star in its death throes. Piercing through the scorched terrain were pinpricks of glittering light—mellow glass that encased the planet's fair crust like a Hell-razed pincushion. Rust-yellow plumes of sulfuric acid seeped through prematurely-opened rift vallies that resided in what used to be blue oceans of diversity. Hydrochloric acid and silicon dioxide dust clouds surged up from the redirected flow of magma chambers, molten fountains spewing straight up into the troposphere and higher. In slow motion, the plumes rose high into the upper reaches of the Zagosa Prime's gravity field, huddled around the Van Allen radiation belt for hundreds of miles, then slowly sank back into atmosphere toward their eventual destination in the glass.

A halo of Titanium dust shimmered even farther out as chunks of debris collected outside the planet's gravity well. UNSC warships—floating dead hulks—most of them disintegrated remnants of a once-proud fleet vanquished by the hundreds of violet specks surrounding the entirety from pole to pole. They'd nearly finished their orbital bombardment, but a few areas remained. One such unblemished patch was right on the edge, right on the equator, now rotating into center view. Just a particle in relation to the overall mass of Zagosa Prime, it still registered to the Doctor and I as the Foreclay Outpost even from this far away. The valley we'd fought to protect was instantly familiar, just seen from a different perspective.

I had the suspicion the Doctor was waiting for this exact moment as he reached into an exterior compartment of his space suit and retrieved another remote transceiver, this one much larger than the one he used to unlock the Thermisticles earlier. He brought it to bear, angling a small aperture directly toward the world ahead. He pressed a button on the surface and a safety lever snapped open, revealing another control. He pressed this one and there was a delay lasting exactly two seconds.

Suddenly, a titanous fireball sprang out of this tiny fortress that once staved a Covenant brigade. The light from the colossal detonation shone tenfold brighter than any of the Covenant fire that smothered the planet thus far. The massive patch of planet shot skyward just outside ground zero. In perfect silence, the concussion roiled with anger and cascaded higher into the stratosphere. We watched it all in slow motion from our vantage, the fiery ballad it was.

The Foreclay Outpost, the mines, all the secrets below were no more.

"Seems we've all lost something down there." Doctor Kleiner gaited closer and tapped me once on the shoulder. "Gunnery Sergeant Smith was a brave man for what he did. He'll never be forgotten."

Kleiner turned and headed towards the airlock.

I caught up with him and we cycled through together. A maze of hydraulic and high pressure lines crawled over the walls, serving to tame the volatile relationship of atmosphere inside and vacuum outside. A hiss of air permeated the chamber and a cluster of green OLEDs pulsed at the entry way. The inner door opened and we stepped through, the last of humans to have taken up residence at Zagosa Prime.

I removed the helmet that had began to feel stuffy. The air inside the ship had more volume and wasn't stale like that of my suit.

I navigated the wide corridors on his lead, past Engineering, skirting by the Med Shed and up a ladder shaft. In a moment, we arrived at the Command Deck. All ancillary systems were kept on standby, waiting for authorized personnel to wake them up again from a long hibernation. Only mission-essential systems were online from what I could gather. The halls were bathed in dim halogen light. Doors opened only manually with hand cranks. Finally, Doctor Kleiner, Captain Lawson and a few Marines and scientists entered the bridge. I waited outside in the main hallway and took a seat on the deck. I checked what provisions I still had on my person. My entire water supply had been used up while at the mining facility. I felt starved but I confirmed long ago that my last rations were used up. A few minutes went by as I rested there, my weapons and my gear sprawled out on the deck beside me.

"Anyone feel like hitting up the galley?"

There was no reply from anyone, just a group of worn out faces briefly regarding my own before retreating into whatever it was that occupied their thoughts. Surely the lot of them grieved for Gunny and the others we lost along the way. Maybe they were too fatigued of grief itself, too tired to think. There was no way to tell.

I took out a field cleaning kit from one of my cargo pockets, then brought my rifle to bear and began breaking it down.

I had gotten to removing the bolt when the bridge hatch opened and Doctor Kleiner appeared through, his sunken face peering into the hallway. "Can anyone operate a communications console? Even basic theory of operations would be of great help to us."

"I can." I responded, instantly losing interest of my weapon's upkeep.

"Are you qualified?"

"Communications is my primary MOS, Doctor."

"Are you comfortable with ship-borne equipment?"

"UNSC employs common systems interfacing throughout ship and shore inventories. I should be okay."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes sir, Doctor."

"Perfect. Follow me, Private."

I slowly got up, shaking off the aches that plagued my bones from all the physical stress I'd endured. I followed him into the Command Deck with a pile of weapon pieces in my hands. Captain Lawson was at the command console, a stately leather-wrapped chair. Two holo-pedestals flanked him, one of which was occupied by the holographic representation of a smart A.I.. I looked past the slew of consoles all around the periphery and towards the view port in front as

Kleiner directed me to a station at the Portside bulkhead.

"Please take your station." Kleiner said with a slow gesture.

I got situated with the controls as I sunk into a chair. The controls weren't instantly familiar, so I activated a tutorial on-screen. Captain Lawson approached my station, placed a hand on the high-backed chair I occupied. I customarily stood up and snapped to attention.

"At ease, Private. Your name?"

"Private Pennington, sir."

"Blake, is it?"

"Yes, sir. I see you've viewed my file, sir."

"Yes, I did. Well, truthfully I've viewed all of Lima Company's files...seven months ago. It's nice to have you aboard. Thank you for volunteering to take up a position that an executive officer normally would. Your service on my boat is a tremendous undertaking. Are you up for it?"

"Yes sir."

"Your leader, Gunnery Sergeant Smith, proved himself to be worthy of the UNSC Medal of Honor. I'll see to it personally that he and his family receive the appropriate honors."

The Naval Captain slowly turned to man his station. In that instant, he stopped and turned again to face me, his brow was arched in curiosity. The field-grade officer was studying me.

After a brief moment of scrutiny, he said, "You earned a degree at your university prior to enlisting and you took the officer prep exam. You got a perfect score. I can count the number of people on two hands that have done that. What's the reason you never commissioned?"

How to respond? Give 'em the truth. A naval captain would appreciate that.

"You could've easily made the mark with your credentials." He added. "Could've been a good leader."

"If I could put it simply, sir, I'd just say that it was my pride for the enlisted corps."

"Now _that's _something you don't hear everyday."

"Couple people told me I was a fool back in my first unit."

"I could understand their perspective. Most people commission for the higher pay and authority. But I admire _your_ perspective. It's quite notable of you."

"Well, truthfully sir, I can't assume full credit. It was my recruiter that ultimately swayed my decision."

"I know. Recruiters are required to provide minutes on all their meetings with prospective recruits and you were one of the few that actually listened to their recruiter, but I think the wrong advice was given that day."

"Well, he told me if I wanted to sit behind a desk all my life, then commissioning was the right choice for me."

"Did you ever think he was just a little bitter when he told you all this?"

"Bitter about what, sir?"

"Well, maybe this recruiter was a bit chapped when he was denied commissioning himself. It's not an easy process. Lots of washouts."

"Actually, the man had two advanced degrees but said to me he wasn't cut out for politicking."

"Well, now this conversation completely turned out to be something I hadn't expected, but I'll just say that the enlisted truly are the backbone of the UNSC and each of you have my respect."

"Likewise, sir. You said you pulled all our records a few months back, so you probably know just about everything about everyone."

"I had you all hand-picked for assignment at Zaragosa Prime, yes. Down to the last private."

"And the Spartan? She must've had some pull in your decisions."

"She was an asset, to be sure, but a single Spartan could not have protected us or stopped that brigade alone."

"Well, sir, she's the reason we're here right now talking about it."

"No, you all are."

I nodded, then I imagined the Gunny responding with something hilarious. I forced composure for my superior. There were still an ample amount of tears that I'd been holding back for the Gunny's passing, and maybe one day I could take time to think about the incredible man that once led this unit, and grieve.

"May I ask why all of us, sir? You'd think for this kind of job you'd get some high-speed ODST unit for it."

"It's a special tour of duty and I'm sure you've gathered that quite some time ago. I needed the right kind of troops for the task, and ODSTs are offensive experts, not defensive. And they're spread incredibly thin to be able to assemble the amount of personnel strength needed. Seventh Army hasn't expanded out far enough to bed down at a place like Zaragosa Prime, either. Lima Company was our best option."

"How did you know who to select for Lima Company?"

"Easy. You've basically got four kinds of servicemen. For some, it's

a family trade. They join, they make a living, they excel at a steady pace and collect their pension when they discharge. Others are bent on payback, which is all well and good. Give them some training and focus, and they'll follow orders and fight as long as they're needed to. And some are just floating in life looking for a job. The last type is the patriot, the one who fights to protect all people. The greater good types."

"Which one are you, sir?"

"I'm the first one. Father was a sailor, his father was, and his father was."

"I guess it's just in your blood."

"Yes, which means I'm an incredibly good judge of character when it comes to military service. Each and every one of you were reviewed extensively. Every recruit has their reasons for joining and they're all just causes. All of you were worthy of the assignment, and I made the final determinations myself. Just as many predicted, all of you exemplified the kind of courage and leadership down there that merits substantial recognition. You are true heroes. Do you ever stop and think about everything you all did down there? Together, in defense of the Outpost, your unit single-handedly defeated a Covenant expeditionary brigade, and that was just part of it. Historians will be citing that battle as a key engagement that led to ultimate victory. Well, that's if we continue that legacy." Lawson flared his chin upward. "Imagine what we'll accomplish moving forward."

"Yeah. I uh...I think we had a bit of luck while just trying to keep each other alive. And we did pretty good, you know, pretty good. I think we're still trying to come to terms with it all and let the shock settle. But now that it's over, what's next?"

"It's not over. Not for you and not for Lima Company. Not for the UNSC. Ever heard of the Cold War?"

A wry smile then appeared from the Captain.

"Vaguely, sir. I remember some history on it back at University."

"What did you remember about that War? What did you take away from it?"

"I think I got out of it what most other people did. Two superpowers epitomized what the definition of deterrence was, sir. A global power struggle on Earth. Back in the twentieth century if I recall correctly.

"True, but it was much more for me when I accessed some old war journals, mandatory reading during my time as a cadet. The winner of that War would be the winner of Earth. Make no mistake...the Covenant are taking us down. And from what information I'm privy to, we're only beginning to attempt the same. It's a war of attrition spanning every front a war can have: ground and aerospace, spies, covert assassinations, cryptographics and communications...your job now. And some pretty interesting technology trinkets that are being uncovered throughout human-controlled space. This War we find ourselves in now is also winner-take-all. Only during the Cold War, the enemies shared

the same world."

"Sir."

"All these worlds must be defended. The more we lose, the closer we come to our end. At the height of the Cold War, there were still friendly lines of communication open between the Russian and American generals. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Yes, a few generals on either side respected one another so much that open dialogue was still maintained. Scholars held that peace was achieved more through the back channels than through the higher diplomacy of politicians."

"I never cared much for the political aspects, sir."

He leaned in closer. "Me neither. And most don't know that Soviet generals confessed something to their American counterparts when the War was in full swing. Do you know what it was they confessed?"

"No."

"They told their American rivals that they knew the war was over for themselves once they understood what kind of military the Americans possessed."

"I thought the Russians lost because of a monetary system collapse."

"No. It was not because the American economy was stronger or because their quality of life was better. It wasn't that American society was a freer one, either. It was because of the people in the American military, Private. Soviet Generals said that as soon as they looked at America's enlisted force, they knew they were already defeated. They probed all American media for intel, tuning into their television and radio channels, reading their newspaper articles. They sent in their spies looking at what privates and airmen and petty officers and gunnery sergeants were doing day to day. The Soviet generals knew that these American men and women were doing more than what they could get even their young officers to do. An enlisted force outshining your officer corps. Such a force cannot be reckoned with."

"I see, sir."

"This is why we will ultimately win, because of units like Lima Company, because of people like Sergeant Smith. This day came in their sacrifice. With the Transit in our possession, we will turn the tide of this War, Private Pennington, and we will honor our fallen in full. The Covenant will see what Humans are capable of and their Elite generals will be that much closer to admitting defeat when it happens. Now, man that console and be at ease."

"Aye sir!"

I took my seat and swung around to face the communications console with pride. My resolve was renewed.

Captain Lawson and his impromptu staff of scientists and enlisted Marines ran procedural diagnostics and gradually brought the ship to operational status. I looked at what was going on around me and tried to remember the last time I had any time to myself. I felt incomplete. I retrieved the sweat-stained notepad from one of my cargo pockets and started to write.

15. Interlude with an Epitaph

_Here lies Zagosa Prime
>_Mighty jewel in pitch-black sky
>_Consumed by fire, bathed in flame
>_She waits for life to spring again_

_For Enemy cometh, Enemy came
>_Searching for what was locked away
>_Hunting and killing and burning the lands
>_All of the blood is on their hands_

_Day and night, we came to blows
>_Fighting for life, fighting for home
>_Omega the fortress, stout as steel
>_Day and night, endured their zeal_

_But something was off, something ordained
>_Why was vic'try so simply attained?
>_The mine held secrets, dark as night
>_Strange devices with fearful might_

_Scientists delved, geniuses played
>_Alien artifact showed a way
>_The power to vanish, power to fly
>_Depart existence, blink of an eye_

_We must run, we must flee
>_Another day holds victory
>_Gather up strength, use the device
>_Innocent citizens paid the price_

_Gunnery Sergeant, so bold and brave
>_Forfeits himself, survivors saved
>_Selfless deed, transcendent-sublime
>_Forever monument, annals of time
>_Nuclear fire, so brilliant-bright
>_Fitting lament for warriors' spite
>

_Hard to go on, hard to restore
>_What faith we had in our endeavor
>_But we will forge on and fight the war
>_One day the Covenant will be no more!_

16. Revelations

****Revelations****

I tucked away the sweat-stained notepad into my cargo pocket. I felt

somewhat rested and relaxed inside a Titanium castle on the far side of the moon.

A miniature army of scientists who'd already outsmarted the Covenant and the Marines I'd fought with were my company today, though weighing the losses we suffered staggered my thoughts. Some of the best men and women I knew would no longer fight alongside us, not to mention the slaughter that was the death of an entire planet was still hard to fathom. I caught a reflection of myself in one of the monitors: a smear of eyes, nose, and mouth. I discerned an evil grin from it as I imagined the many different fates an enemy force could meet its end as they simply disappeared, how thankful entire besieged colonies would surely be.

I looked around the bridge, still smiling. White lights flooded the room from above. LEDs blinked on/off among consoles. Technicians and Marines were everywhere, configuring the _Thermistacles_ for what could very well be its maiden voyage to Reach. Most of the ship's occupants bustled with purpose, though my communications duties were somewhat superfluous for the moment. I got to slow down and take everything in for a change. Captain Lawson sat in his chair, a rich swath of antique leather, richly conditioned with an oily sheen. A plethora of controls dotted the armrests. And by his side was the holo-pedestal in which a figure was standing—floating in mid air. I had never seen one before until now, only heard of them.

I stood up and stretched. Soon my shift would end. Another Marine would relieve me of my post and hopefully their shift would be more eventful than mine.

The doctor was at the forefront of the bridge, standing face to face with the thick window. His reflection in the backlit pane was nearly a mirror of himself: a tall, thin man with a balding scalp and thick glasses. His face was partly sunken in, though the strong cheekbones and large, intelligent eyes obscured the true age of this remarkable man. A fellow scientist was beside him. Together, the brilliant minds conversed on pertinent matters, maybe the mission's next steps. A moment of pure concentration went by on his part before catching my own reflection behind his.

"Private Pennington." He turned.

"Doctor, do you know who is to replace me at the comm. console?"

"I'm not sure, Private. I believe it's best to consult your NCOIC for that."

"How long have you had an AI aboard the ship, Doctor?"

"Ever since we discovered the device in the mines. She's been a priceless asset. Deciphered immense amounts of alien encoding for us. Without her—why, we would not have accomplished all this."

"What's her name?"

"Rosetta. I think your replacement is on deck, Private." The Doctor gestured past my shoulder.

I turned around and there was Haze. "See you later, Doc."

"Private," the Doctor said, stopping me short, "before you go, I'd like to speak to you alone."

"Sure thing."

"Wait for me in the officers' galley."

I was just about to greet Haze when Amy entered the bridge. She paused at the entrance and assessed the room. I felt the usual intimidation by her mere presence, but the obligation I felt to thank her overwhelmed. She sensed my approach and looked directly at me.

"Chief, I know how close you and the Gunny were. I'm really sorry. I wanted to—" "

Before I could go on, she threw up that hand. The same hand she gave me back in the Omega Wing. The same hand I got when I tried to be of consolation after some of the most brutal combat we ever experienced as a team. Now, as Lima Company was in total safety again, she didn't care for what I had to say.

"I'll be fine." she said, not breaking her stride toward the Captain.

I met Haze on the way out.

"Man, you have a talent for getting chastised by Spartans. Good going, Hemingway."

"It's Shakespeare."

"If it makes you feel any better, I've noticed her become even more of a loner since you came aboard Lima Company." He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Relax, man. You and her...cut from a different block. You couldn't _hope_ to relate to her, bro. Stop trying to get on her level."

"I guess you're right. She's a Spartan, I'm Grunt. Fine with me."

"Yeah. Now you're getting it. Hey check out this helmet art I got." Haze hoisted his cover to eye level.

Magician with a black, velvet coat and top-hat, one of the arms outstretched towards me with an Ace of diamonds protruding from the sleeve. The other arm was pulled inward cradling a jet-black ball, what could only be the Transit. Above the art read Lima Company Illusionists.

"I like it. You my replacement?"

"Communications, right?"

"Right over there. I warmed up the seat for ya."

"How long is the shift?"

"Eight standard hours."

"Then I'm glad you warmed it for me."

"Take care." I spun on a heel and headed out of the command deck and left for the galley.

After a few turns, I found myself at the entrance to the meeting place Kleiner requested. Here, sub-zero refrigerators and microwave ovens lined one entire side of the room. The ceiling was low with exposed venting. Long mess tables consumed much of the center space. I grabbed some crackers from a nearby serving basketâ€"stale.

"Ready for some training?" I heard Kleiner say as he entered the mess hall.

"What's going on?' I asked.

"I'm training a select few Marines with the Transit. There may come a time when I'm unable to use it."

"What do you mean, unable?"

"If something catastrophic should happen, someone needs to be able to use it."

"Okay, do we train here?"

"Yes, I'm going to give it to you now. Do not deviate from my instructions."

"Okay." I stepped closer to the Doctor as he held the black ball out at shoulder height.

I wrapped both hands around it. Other than a sudden coolness, I felt nothing else on its surface. He let it go and it was heavier than I expected. Though the size of a grapefruit, it handled like a bowling ball. It felt incredibly dense; suspicion of indestructibility came over me. I could see my reflection on its surface. My face distorted with the activity inside, crawling and oozing with a darkness black as space. I rotated it around in my hand. Colors came into view, contrasted nicely against the jet-black. There were reds, blues, greens, and yellows; arrowhead shapes and dots.

"Wave your hand over the Transit."

I complied and swept a palm over its surface. An image came to life as if surfacing from inside. It was the room. The galley was on display inside the Transit.

"Now," Doctor Kleiner said, "You can populate the display with organic and inorganic objects if you desire. We will move that chair from on top of that table to the hall outside, about ten meter's distance. There should be a red arrow symbol somewhere. Do you see it?"

"Yes."

"Touch it and hold down. Drag it to the chair and let go."

I did so. I took the red arrow and placed it on top of the plastic

chair, then let it go. The icon hovered over the chair. "Okay, done."

"Now, look at the two yellow circles off to the side. Choose the larger one. It's a scalar. You can zoom in or out with those two. Tap the topmost one just once.

I did so and the view expanded, revealing more of the _Thermisticles' _interior. It had everything mapped. I could see outside the galley and into the nearby hallway where the chair's destination would be. "Done."

"Press and hold the red arrow again. It now turns blue and you can drag it to your destination. Let it go when you are done."

I took hold of the chair once more, resting lifelessly atop the table. I placed a finger on it, dragged its blue vector behind the hatch of the galley, and let it go.

The chair disappeared. A muffled clattering came an instant later just behind the bulkhead, the chair falling to the deck from mid air.

"Good, Private Pennington. Very good. Now we will practice multi-target relocation."

"I'm going to transit more than one object?"

"Yes. How does four chairs sound?"

"Sounds great, Doctor. I'm ready."

"Then choose your four. Place a red arrow over each, zoom out to see your end objective, then tap that point in space twice. All four should relocate to your desired set of coordinates."

Four arrows, one destination. Two taps and they all vanished from the galley. A quartet of plastic rattles rang in report on the other side. It was easier than I thought. But I wonderedâ€|how much energy did that consume? It was said that it took all of a nuclear reactor's might just to teleport Lima Company and the others from the Lambda Core. And it still wasn't enough. One person was left behind. I closed my eyes and tried not to wonder what might've happened to Gunny Smith in those final moments.

Then, a strange sight caught me eye in the black sphere: a faint, purple glowâ€|lighting on and off rhythmically like an interstellar pulsar.

"Doctor, what is this purple dot in the Transit?"

"That? I believe that's an indicator to the operator that no more energy exists and that it needs re-energizing."

"If you wish to cancel a jump, simply wave your hand over the display as if you were initializing it. And that concludes training of the Singular-Point Field Effect Manipulator. Do you have any questions?"

"I guess not. You explained it well."

"Do you feel you've mastered it? If asked to use it in a combat situation, do you feel you could use it with confidence?"

"Yes, Doctor. I believe I can."

"Good. Because there may be a time when the need arises."

"Who else will you teach it to?"

"Not many. The Captain requested your name specifically, along with one alternate who shall remain nameless."

"Why me as the primary? I'm one of the lowest ranking here, Doctor."

"You were one of the two chosen because Lima Company has no officers. It's likely it will remain that way unless the Captain commissions someone at the upcoming award ceremony. There were some well-qualified NCOs in your unit, but none that were college-educated."

"I don't think I understand? Having a degree in something makes me qualified to use _this?_"

Kleiner nodded, his eyes widening. "In the most important way, yes, it qualified you. You've shown initiative. You've shown you can see something through to its end, something that took sacrifice and dedication. You know what delayed reward is. You can multitask and prioritize. And the Captain seems to think you're a natural-born leader as well. He's parsed through some of Lima Company's after actions reports and mission footage while Rosetta and everyone else has been prepping the ship. He's beginning to know more about who's who."

"I'll use it to the best of my abilities."

"I have a good feeling you will, and I don't often stake outcomes on feelings. Your neuro-genetics are surpassed by only the Spartan's, so you're more than physically capable. You've earned the Captain's trust so far. As for me, I've fulfilled my obligations to him and this mission. I've already instructed the alternate to take possession only if you are incapable of operating it. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me."

"Okay, Doctor. Thanks. Who's the alternate?"

"That's beyond your need to know." Kleiner shrugged. "Better that way, yes?"

"I understand."

"And they'll have a close eye on you. Get some sleep. You've had a rough few days."

I proceeded to my quarters after Kleiner exited the room. I felt a subtle thumping in my chest. Adrenaline was still lingering in my system, but the walk to my bunk calmed me down enough that I could start to think about rest. I entered the room and immediately I slid under the covers, and I began to think. I thought about if there

would ever be a time when the UNSC could bounce back from its losing streak. Because we didn't have much left to lose.

17. Castle in the Sky

****Castle in the Sky****

I left my quarters. The air around me was a pure haze, almost opaque. I walked through this mist, not knowing where I'd arrive. Had the air purifiers gone faulty? Overcondensation was common with older, less efficient condensers.

I could see clearly for about one meter, no more.

Many steps I took until faint voices barely penetrated the thick mist. If memory served me correctly, I'd be entering the galley in just a few paces. Sounds guided me moreso. I could hear laughter, giggling, and playful screams of children not far ahead. The fog grew thin and visibility increased. I approached a clearing and there was enough light that I could see my hands. They were small like a child's, and as I walked closer to the source of light and laughter, I could see outlines of familiar faces. I could see my home. This was my neighborhood. I looked around: my friends were playing in the street.

At the end of the road, a dear friend of mine threw a pigskin. It spiraled through the air to another. He caught it and spiked it to the gravel like heroes of his would at real games. The girls sat on a lush patch of grass across the street drinking homemade lemonade. They pointed and gossipped and giggled, doing what girls of their age do. But one girl—she wasn't with the others. She was out in the street with fresh scrapes and bruises on her knees and elbows. She was different. She liked to play. She was often more skilled than some of the guys. She wasn't taller or stronger, but she was cunning and tenacious. She had potential.

She was the new girl in town on vacation visiting her relatives. She'd wandered to our street looking for fun and games. I didn't know her well, but she felt familiar as if I should've known her at some point in my past. Some resented her for being able to outclass them in their favorite pastime. I hadn't met her yet. I remembered the intimidation I felt when I first saw her play. I wasn't embarrassed by it like the others. I never once resented her abilities.

One of my neighbors grasped the football he just spiked and threw it back to his friend. The intended receiver reached for it, but this girl dashed in front of him and snatched it out of the air. She held it close as she landed, not losing a stride as she picked up speed. The chase was on.

He matched her pace and followed her line, but where she lacked breakaway power, she made up for it in wit. She was very agile—

She shifted, zigzagged, stopped on a dime, and she threw him more off balance the faster they went. In an instant, he lost traction on one foot and nearly fell on his side. She pumped her legs again and left him far behind, glancing rearward with a smirk. All he could do was slap a hand to the ground in frustration. "You're not that fast!"

I chuckled to myself. If she wanted that ball, it was hers, regardless of how fast she was. No one was willing to give her the credit she deserved, though. Having her on your team just meant you were more likely to win, that was all. She was a decent athlete, nothing more. No one conversed with her, talked about things other than football with her. I thought differently. She had a fire that I respected. I hoped she'd never lose it.

Now, she was too far away for the boy to even hope catching her. She enacted her own celebration ritual and thumbed her nose at her rival. She caught my admiring eye from far away and smiled.

I looked towards the void I entered this world through. The troubled reality of the universe was back that way. The hearsay of colonial dissidents and the spook stories of Covenant weren't in this dream.

I had my own castle in the sky. I was safe.

I would live in this dream until it ended.

The boy eyed the new girl with envy. As she danced in her own private end zone, I noticed a couple at the far end of the street. They were husband and wife on a stroll. I had never seen them before, possibly neighbors from a different community. The weather was nice today and brought out a lot of people I'd never seen, but something was odd about them. The way they walked hand in hand didn't seem natural for either of them. They were close together but distant, and they paid particular mind to this new girl—pointing and nodding at her discretely.

But one of them gasped in shock. I looked just in time to see her on the ground in a cloud of dust. My neighbor and friend had pushed her down to the ground as she celebrated. I felt embarrassment of our friendship as he took the ball away from her loose grip and trotted off. He obtained his revenge in a shameful way. He also thought he got the best of her. He was wrong.

As he reveled in triumph, she pushed herself up and chased after him. The stealth she exuded was remarkable. He didn't know she was coming until all her weight slammed into him from behind, knocking the ball loose. Dazed, he looked for her but it was too late. She was gone in a flash with the ball. He was more furious than ever and ran like the wind.

Again, she was too distant.

He placed his hands on his hips and breathed heavily. What was once an angry and determined look on his face was now one of acceptance and defeat. He was tired and frustrated. He wasn't going to have it his way today. She was going to win, and him nodding respect to her and turning away confirmed that.

She stood tall and alone at the far end of the road. I took a chance and ran over to her as the street crowd began to dwindle. "Hey, that was nice. I think that's the first time that has ever happened here."

"Thanks, Blake."

"You know my name?"

"I might be better at sports than these guys, but I still hang with the girls."

She dropped the ball at her side and brought her hands to bear in front of her face. Her palms were skinned and bloodied and surely stinging.

"Yeah, are you ok? That fall you had looked pretty nasty."

She took a second to ponder the question, but instead of replying she just waved me off. She bent down for the ball and walked away.

"What's your name?" I shouted after her.

"Amelia."

That was the last I ever saw of the girl from Beta Hydrii. The only thing I knew of where she came from was that her colony had vast continents with long beaches.

Alone, I looked around. Everyone was gone.

All the houses lining the street started to lose color. Red brick and concrete began to fade to grey-white, exactly like the fog slowly approaching again. The laughter was entirely silent. The world felt empty. There was nothing more to see or do or feel from a time nearly drowned out by a new life filled with war. The dream itself was ushering me out. I began to accept that it was time to face the reality awaiting me again. I turned and proceeded into the heaviest patch of fog, which now felt more of a home than this place I visited all too briefly. Strange, but true.

My next sight was that of the white ceiling above my bunk. It was low and confining. The heavy feeling of waking eyelids wasn't upon me after a dream so vivid. I was instantly awake. I rolled over and hopped onto the floor, feeling the need to cleanse. I proceeded down the corridors with a towel around my waist, shower shoes on my feet, and liquid soap in my hands. The air was cold as it hit my bare chest, my arms reacting with goose bumps. I rounded the corner and entered the shower room, walking into a wall of steam at the doorway. The sound of purifiers and water flowing through deionizers were the only sounds to be heard.

Usually the shower rooms were fully occupied and had a lot of voices. There was only water crashing into ceramic tiles. Once through the first wall of vapor, I saw Amy standing naked under a shower head. Her body was well-defined, but not what I'd imagined. She could pass for an ordinary female, even with the amazing feats she'd accomplished still fresh in my mind. The water flowed from her short, brown hair, down the sharp line of her jaw, cascading into the hollow of her neck, then pouring like a waterfall as it rounded her breasts. Her skin was creamy-white, almost fully pale.

She turned to let the water hit her back, coming around to face me. Our eyes met.

I realized I hadn't moved.

I saw her face for the first time and was blinded by a different kind of beauty.

"How many females are in Lima Company?" she asked. The wording was direct and so was the tone in her voice, as if I was being examined.

The sound of rushing water seemed to overpower her voice and I was unsure why she asked the question. She stood patiently for my response, but a gut feeling told me it would be impolite to keep her waiting. I felt she expected a quick, correct answer. "I think there's about fifteen other females in Lima Company." I answered straightforwardly.

"Then why are you staring at me?"

I forced a straight face.

"I wasn't staring. Just curious to know who else was here."

I walked in and I snatched the towel off my waist, threw it onto a nearby bench and chose a shower stall in the most dense patch of steam. I tried not to look at her as I turned on a faucet. She'd finished her rinsing and walked to a bench for a towel, patting herself dry rather quickly as I started to lather. After I rinsed the shampoo from my hair, I turned around and she was gone.

Once dried and clothed, I thought about where to go kill time until my shift began a half-hour from now. I wasn't hungry and I wasn't feeling social. I wasn't tired enough to fall asleep again. For once, I was fully rested after our private war thousands of miles and minutes distant. I felt something wasn't right, though many things weren't right. So many things in my life were in disarray. I rounded the corner in the hall and proceeded straight ahead to the bridge in order to get involved in something and keep busy. There were more technicians and Marines milling about the entrance than usual as Captain Lawson held his usual post at the command console. He looked weary and taxed. The job of a commander depended on the efficiency of his entire force. I began to wonder if there was more Lima Company could do for him.

Holmes was at my station, his fingers dancing about the console, keying commands and typing messages. I hadn't expected to see the bridge this busy so soon. For all I knew, the only matter at hand was to proceed to Reach at our own pace. Eventually get a debriefing, submit after actions reports, earn a few days rest at the finest retreat in the galaxy, and then get the usual briefings on the next mission thereafter.

I approached Holmes and knelt down to his level as he sat face to face with his console. "Hey. What's the latest?"

An absentminded Holmes replied a moment later. "â€|Hey. You're just in time. Sleep well?"

"Actually, yeah. Haven't slept this well in a while."

"Good. Glad you're awake because you're gonna want to see

this."

"What's going on? What'd I miss?"

"I think we've finally got orders. I think we might be moving out."

"No shit, huh?" I looked at the mission clock: fifty-two standard hours had passed since we boarded the _Thermisticles_, laying dormant in her shadowy depression. "What's the word?"

"Flash Traffic, it just came in." Holmes punched in a few new commands and an Emergency Action Message appeared on his screen. The orders couldn't have been more than a minute old as I read the timestamp on the introduction transcript. Holmes keyed in further. Together, we read:

**United Nations Space Command Priority Transmission

>FLASH 097725-AÎ@
Encryption Code: **Red

>Public Key: N/A

>From: (CODE NAME) The Smoking Gun

>To: (CODE NAME) World Traveler

>Subject: OPERATION: ISLAND HOP

>Classification: FOUO/Eyes Only (X-Ray Directive)

/START FILE/ DECRYPTION PROTOCOL/

FLASH TRANSMISSION DIRECTED TO ZACOM R&D SPECIAL OPERATIONS/CC

FLASH TRAFFIC REDIRECTED TO UNSC THERMISTICLES C2 VIA CLASS-VII ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (ROSETTA)

**COMMENCE OPERATION: ISLAND HOP AT WILL. **Per General Order 98.93.120, you are authorized to take command of applicable military personnel, equipment and assets at any MAJCOM in the target path with CODE-WORD CLEARANCE: LIBERATUS.

**DO NOT **under any circumstances head to Earth or proceed on any vector that leads to Earth unless given the scramble order.

ATTENTION: ANY BREACH OF CODE-WORD CONFIDENTIALITY OR MISSION PARAMETERS IS PUNISHABLE BY DEATH PURSUANT TO ARTICLE 192/FTO, UNIFORM CODE OF MILITARY JUSTICE AND THE AMENDED ARTICLES OF THE UNITED SECURITY ACTS OF 2162.

/END/

/ATTACHED FILE 1 OF 20/

July 7, 2552 (MIL CALENDAR)

>MAJCOM-to-MAJCOM Beta Priority CommuniquÃ@
Subject: Request of presence

Captain Lawson,

It pleases me to announce to a select group of intelligence professionals that a high-priority briefing will be conducted here following a very lengthy and comprehensive phase of intelligence production that has given this echelon extremely substantial insight into Covenant staging areas and deployment cycles, and it would greatly benefit us if you could show up to the

/SERVICE_INTERRUPT - PRIORITY LEVEL 0 TRANSCRIPT GENERATED...STBY/

```
>SECURITY_VIOLATION: (0) event occurred at console [by console
operator] %INIT ERR-DISABLE STATE/
>SECURITY_VIOLATION: %LINE PROTOCOL TERMINATED %TERMINAL UPLINK
TERMINATED/
>SECURITY_VIOLATION: %CONTACT SECURITY ADMINISTRATOR OR SHIP
COMMANDER FOR FURTHER GUIDANCE/
>END TRANSCRIPT/
```

"What the hell?"

The application abruptly ended.

"Where'd the rest of the file go?"

"Looks like some sort of lockdown procedure overrode the whole thing." I offered.

Holmes immediately placed his hands atop the keyboard to troubleshoot.

"I'll see what happened and fix this."

He re-opened the messaging application. It shouldn't have closed without direct action by him, which I was sure he hadn't done. Something triggered a defense mechanism at this console. A hasty power-up could've caused a glitch, but Rosetta would've surely detected any anomalies. Before consulting her, Holmes investigated further. After a minute of searching for the message, it was quite evident what we were looking for wasn't in the inbox. Holmes opened the deleted items section next, perhaps thinking he accidentally pressed the wrong key at some point and sent our elusive file down the trash chute.

No.

"Where'd this thing run off to?"

Holmes' brow began to furrow and he leaned back in his chair to clear his head and think. After a few frustrating seconds, he bolted upright and began accessing a totally different section of his operating system. His keystrokes were light and swift with full concentration vested into this task.

"What now?" I asked.

Holmes answered me without glancing away from the screen. "There's something screwy going on and I need to find out what it might be. That was a God-damned Red-coded priority Flash addressed to, presumably, Captain Lawson. He'll not be happy if he doesn't get that message. I'm accessing the registry."

"You have access to that? The ship's registry?"

"Right now, I'm the only one who can."

"What about Rosetta?"

"What about her?"

"We could bring this up to her, see what she thinks, and she'll probably engineer a solution in half that time we could."

Holmes smirked. "Eh, maybe, but I want to try and do this myself."

"Fine, suit yourself. Just saying she's about a billion times faster than you or me."

Holmes was silent as he carried on.

Of course I might very well be as proud as Holmes in my own abilities. It was always the outsider, the detached observer, who saw the bigger picture in every situation. I'd learned this by now, and figured I'd let Holmes forge ahead out of a sense of pity.

It was odd that this console, and especially the ship's registry, wasn't monitored a thousand times per second by her. She could easily do it. Why hadn't she intervened already? Unless...she pulled the file herself. Buried it somewhere.

I turned away from Holmes and looked to her, that holographic form of hers conversing directly with the Captain. Her shoulders were squared to his, their eyes locked. She hadn't glanced at me. Why would she? That would be a dead giveaway. She knew I was here with Holmes, how couldn't she know? She likely knew what we were up to and what we humans were thinking. She'd likely calculated all the possible outcomes of our curiosity, what questions we'd ask and when.

What was Operation Island Hop?

Who was The Smoking Gun?

Holmes waved at me from his seat. I caught myself staring straight ahead into a blurry monitor. My vision came back into focus as he wakened me from my musings. "Hey, _Thermisticles _to Pennington."

"Yeah, I'm here." I said.

"Something doesn't add up, Penn. There's no record of this file existing. There's no audit trail available to me. It just vanished."

"Kinda like the Transit does, eh?"

"C'mon, help me out here. We're screwed if we can't recover this message."

"Alright, what do you think happened? How does a file vanish without any evidence of it vanishing?"

His brow furrowed again. "I don't know. A virus?"

"Doubtful. How long was this ship idling on the moon?"

"Probably pretty long."

"So, hypothetically, if it wasn't a virus, which Rosetta would probably know about, then what?"

"You're acting like you know something I don't."

"Not know. Just a guess."

"Well, take a guess for me, Blake."

"I think it's her."

"Rosetta?"

Holmes twisted in his seat to get a good glance beyond me and to the command console. I could still hear her conversing with the Captain over my shoulder. They likely had a lot to discuss going forward. He swung his eyes back to me.

"You think she pulled it?"

"Who else...What else can do that?"

"Well, I suppose no one. I guess you're right. But why? I was here at this station. I received the message. I was supposed to forward it to the Captain. I'm competent."

"So, either she wanted that honor, or she deemed in a split second that it wasn't for our eyes."

"Ok, fine, but why permanently delete the freaking delivery receipt as well?"

"Because that message, Holmes, doesn't exist."

Holmes leaned back again, staring at me. He was silent for a moment.

"...What's going on here, Shakespeare? Are we getting duped again?"

I glanced over my shoulder once more. She was heavy into her discussions with the Captain. "I don't know, but whatever it is, it's high up there. You said it was Flash traffic at the Red level. We're not normally supposed to look at that kind of stuff unless it's read _to _us, right?"

"Sure, but we were assigned to this duty. Rosetta could've at least back-briefed me after she snatched a piece of my job away from me."

"Don't take it personal. It's just business. We're just button-pushers. No one's gonna ask an enlisted guy for his opinion, and I think she has a lot more to accomplish than us in her functions."

"It's not that personal for me, Blake, but the only thing she accomplished right now is amplifying my curiosity. I'm quite tired of the two-fingered hand dragging me around by the nostrils, and I know you are too."

"What's done is done. Our heads have to be in the right place."

"What place is that?"

"Helping the Captain in any way we can. Inventorying, inspection, resting up for the next mission."

"Jeez, Blake, who died and made you squad leader?"

"Your mom, alright? Now don't think too much about that file. It obviously wasn't meant for anyone but the Captain."

Holmes hunched over and nodded. "Damn, I'm tired!"

I could understand. We were just coming out of the fatigue of battle. A battle that would later define a war.

"Take off early," I said with a smile, "I got it."

"You sure? Your shift doesn't begin until another thirty minutes."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Get going. Get some shuteye."

"Thanks, man. Wake me up when something happens." he said with a grin.

"You know it." I took my seat.

Holmes exited the bridge. He wore a certain smile on the way out, met passerbys with it. It was a smile that told of pride, pain, hardship, endurance—of victory.

Our entire journey had been wrought with the highest peaks and the lowest valleys. We were ripped apart from our battles and pieced back together again by our own slivers of hope. We made it. We triumphed. We were going to finish the fight.

A light flicked on at my terminal. It was an incoming signal on a UNSC frequency. Were there friendlies about? Survivors?

A squawk came over my headset, most likely interference cutting into the channel or another listener blatantly stealing bandwidth. Maybe a solar flare or intense thermals from the ghosted Zagosa bleeding her charred soul into the external arrays. But it was on the entire receivable spectrum...Was I being jammed? Could the Covenant have found us?

I scrutinized the tools available to me and deduced that it wasn't what I feared. Rather, I heard a human voice when I patched that signal into my headset. It was so human that I forgot it was a machine. "How are you, Private Pennington?"

I slid the microphone down to bear in front of my mouth. "I'm fine. How are you, Rosetta?"

I asked the question in reply to her own. It was the natural, courteous response. But was it a real conversation? She was surely programmed to formulate a variety of appropriate answers, but could this AI comprehend the meaning of them?

"I'm doing just fine, though being cooped up in a less than spacious network is not the hospitality I'm used to."

I wasn't overwhelmed by such a unique answer to ordinary small talk, but I was beginning understand how much versatility she possessed in her logic.

"Hopefully, we won't be in space too long." I replied.

"Yes," she replied, "not too long indeed."

"You know our destination?"

"Yes."

"Where are we headed?"

"Reach."

"What's the next mission?"

"It's classified for now, Private. The Captain will determine when Lima Company will be cleared to know."

"Yes ma'am."

"We need to keep a tight lid on critical information at this stage in our operations. I do apologize if that weighs down on any uncertainties Lima Company might have at this time, but we must all work together in order to uphold the compartmentalization of any sensitive information we may encounter in the future. This means knowing what we're cleared to access and when."

She knew exactly what I was thinking. Only one response was the correct one. "I agree, ma'am."

"Thank you, Private. I'll have this same discussion with Corporal Holmes. Also, speaking of discussions, the enemy is hailing us."

I spun around in my chair and found her holoform. She winked at me. I spun back around and faced my console.

It was lit up like an excited fusion coil.

I scrambled for the controls, searched for the correct sequence to locate and process the incoming signal. While I boggled in my seat, frantically looking for the correct command string at the console, Rosetta whispered, "I took the liberty of deciphering the message. Want to see?"

"Sure." I said, trying to safeguard my dignity with an even tone. "Give it to me on screen."

"Splendid!" she said playfully. She put the message on display, already in our language. It was still a chore to read with the Covenant's broken understanding of our wording, and our broken understanding of theirs as well. It was universally understood that there was no direct translation between the two opposing lexicons. I scanned the text as best I could, trying to comprehend the misplaced verbiage and trying to sift through the flagrant use of religious connotation.

It was a simple message, maybe a few sentences long. I read it carefullyâ€|

Then I froze.

I read the scope one more time, took a deep breath, and confirmed what was on display. I looked around. Each person was engrossed in their task. The bridge was a beehive of information and activity, but nothing felt the same anymore. They were prepared for the next mission, while I was now consumed in the past. The Captain was seated at his own console consulting ship reports. "Captainâ€|sirâ€|"

"Yes, Private, what is it?" he asked, turning to me. He gaited closer, asking, "What have you got?"

"It's a message from the Covenant." I said as he hovered over my chair. I could feel the color drain from my face as I re-read the message again and again.

"No...there's no way." Lawson whispered.

"What?" Doctor Kleiner asked, rushing over to my station. "Do they know our location?"

"No, it's the Gunny." I replied. "The Covenant claim to have himâ€|and they want to trade."

18. An Exception to the Rule

****An Exception to the Rule****

"Absolutely unacceptable! Are you insane?!"

The Doctor was furious.

Everything had been relatively calm and under control amidst the Command Deck a moment ago until someone suggested the boldest thing I ever heard. More bold and audacious than all the tales of every great Ship Commander's career-defining maneuvers combined.

Two neutral ships from either side would somehow agree to meet halfway and Lima Company would use the newly-discovered Device to double cross the entire Armada, essentially steal the Gunny and flee as the enemy delivered terms.

It was obvious Kleiner would categorically reject that line of logic. He'd see zero chance in risking the Transit. His position was defensible, but so was the other, and looking at the many faces of Lima Company was a harsh call to reality. It was instilled in every

troopâ€”the lifeblood of the UNSCâ€”to never, ever leave a fallen comrade behind. The oft-unspoken rule summoned the awareness of anyone who'd fought and bled and sacrificed alongside others the way we did.

The Command Deck of the Thermisticles had taken on a new atmosphere. Marines and civilians crowded the bridge trying to gain insight into this sudden development. This enemy broadcast had troubled everyone regardless of which side of the issue they stood on. The air was still, the thoughts heavy. Total silence followed Doctor Kleiner's outburst. The enemy attempting to use the Gunny as a bargaining chip was one thing, but the Doctor we'd come to know as a veritable hero so quickly dismissing the fate of Lima Company's leader was quite another.

Removing myself from both sides of the argument as best I could, I realized something that very few others likely had: that even if Gunnery Sergeant Smith was extracted before the Outpost's destruction, did our adversary really believe we were going to give up the Transit for one man? I then cringed at how quickly I'd resigned the life we'd already once left behind on that dying world, but as the Doctor strongly alluded to, there was the inescapable, cold reality to acknowledge: whether or not he was still alive, the martyr he'd become was his true destiny. I reluctantly endorsed the idea even while my grieving for his fate was swallowing me whole.

In the grand scheme of the mission and indeed our very survival as an interstellar civilization, there was simply no trading this device for anyone or anything. The more I pondered the value of human life, even a single life, I imagined the Gunny would have us turn and run knowing that decision would save countless more. And that's exactly what he gave us: an altruistic farewell from a man who urged us to live and fight another day with his final actions.

An exception to the rule.

"How would they even know we're still here?" Lawrence asked, now directing his sights outward to everyone as if heralding a thorough debate. "This could all be a bluff to draw us out into the open. The Gunny's gone. Nothing could have survived that blast. You all know that."

There was a willful, almost wishful skepticism evident from the majority of people in the room despite Lawrence's observations, and they were compelling on their own. I could see it on the faces of nearly every Lima Company Marine. Lawrence was Sierra Company, now just a handful of misplaced survivors looking for closure, rest and a chance to contact whatever family they had, wherever they were. It was easy for an outsider to let go. Lima Company wouldn't roll over so easily.

"Maybe you're wrong." Haze said. "Maybe they got him out in time."

"C'mon, that's stretching it."

"It is possible. They infiltrated every sector of those mines, even with all those security measures. They could've egressed in that same amount of time or quicker. There is a small chance they have him."

From a corner of my vision, I could see Doctor Kleiner cross his arms with a facial expression I hadn't yet seen on him. It showed his palpable dissent against Haze and people of a similar opinion pondering the issue any further as if it could never be remotely conducive to our future undertakings.

The Doctor was nevertheless content to find ally in Private Lawrence and let the Marine continue the argument to its bitter end.

"You're not gonna go for _this_, _are you?" Lawrence fired back. "This bait-and-hook? C'mon, it's a ruse. A half-assed one at that. Don't play into their hand, Haze. The Gunny is _gone_, and for all they know we're long gone too. They're clutching at straws. They're desperate."

"We have the right people, the right tactics, the right tools, _two_ _Spartans, and the Doctor's crystal ball that can see around corners and through fucking walls! Let's do the right thing and get him back! We owe it to him after all he's done for us."

A moment of silence passed, then the Doctor weighed in. "I don't like it. Something is wrong. We can't do this. We have to proceed with Operation Island Hop and I'm sure the Captain would agree. Sir, you have ONI and HighComm directives to abide by and the time is ticking."

"Maybe we should radio back and demand they show us proof," said Holmes, clasp ing a fist in his other hand, "and this way we'll at least know if he's truly alive."

"_No_." Kleiner boomed.

Again the room fell silent for a marked amount of time. The elderly civilian suddenly projected an air of authority, one we'd never seen before. I never thought he'd be able to interject the Marines' attempts to steer the conversation against his favor, but here he was doing it. Not one person in the room was unnoticing of this new side to the Doctor.

"_Again_," he shook his head dismissively, "unacceptable as that risks giving away our position. Getting your hopes up like this was foolish enough and now we're wasting more time. This behavior is counter to the Captain's mission and quite frankly to common sense. Lawrence is correct. This is what they want. Let's be on our way and let logic prevail."

The Doctor walked away and crashed down in a chair, sinking into it with a fatigue I understood at this point. He'd labored through a side of the argument that was increasingly more palatable than one which pursued farce and figment. He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, then began rubbing his temples, perhaps wishing that the Captain was without a doubt on his side.

Haze humbly gaited towards him. "Sir, it's the Gunny we're talking about"

"I know!" Doctor Kleiner glared at the young Marine, but quickly regained his composure and stood again. With a brief moment, he finally put the squabble to rest by driving home the most salient

aspect of our grim reality.

"I know it's your Sergeant, but we absolutely can't risk losing the Device. It is more important than his life or my life or yoursâ€|combined. This shouldn't even be up for debate."

The Lead Scientist instantly looked to the Captain again, who was still candidly observing all the arguments, appearing to take everyone's opinion in stride.

"Yes, Doctor," Haze replied, cupping his hands in a pleading manner, "but we could get in, get the Gunny out of there, and leave so fast that they wouldn't even realize what hit 'em!"

"Maybe we could, Private," Kleiner spoke over his shoulder, his body now squared to the Command Station above, "but it's still too risky. You either cannot or will not see that if there's just one slip-up, one variable not accounted for in such an operation, it could all turn very dire for everyoneâ€|not just us. This isn't some operation where a few lives and some equipment is at risk. It's the entire War. The enemy knows what you're capable of now. Do you think they would just let you zip in and zip out unabated? The amount of ambush awaiting you is reason enough to relent your sentiment here and now. Forgoing the near-certainty of you failing and dying needlessly, you would also be risking the tool that could win entire battles and then see it turned over into enemy hands. Would you want to be the one responsible for that? No, you wouldn't, Marine. So, we're going to play it safe. We're going to play the hand we've been dealt."

Kleiner caught his breath. The man was fuming, and rightly so given his position.

"Maybe it's time to consult the dealer." Haze mumbled, glancing at Captain Lawson.

The Doctor's eyes bulged out widely, casting a spellbound look toward Haze as if the Private had gone crazy thinking he could deal directly with a Naval Captain, now darting his eyes at nearly every uniformed member posted at the Bridge as if all of Lima Company had gone crazy too. In all actuality, we had. The whole situation was utter insanity...

The UNSC now had in its possession a device that could teleport matter to unforeseen distances, we had just been informed that the enemy quite possibly had our thought-to-be-dead Gunnery Sergeant in captivity, and some of us were now considering going in guns blazing to steal him back.

I wasn't sure what to think at this point. I wasn't sure where I stood.

I could sense that most of Lima Company would jump at the chance to do a snatch and grab for Gunny Smith, but if we were given the green light to do so by Captain Lawson's permission, the Doctor would surely feel betrayed. More prosaically, I couldn't imagine a Naval Captain would so readily consider such a reckless option to begin withâ€|lancing headlong into unknown, enemy territory chasing after obvious deceptions. So far, the Naval Captain remained silent at his station, which meant he was struggling as well.

Doctor Kleiner was the brightest among us. The Doctor had been our guide, and practically our savior. He was the man behind the myth of the Transit. He shepherded us from the darkness of the mines to the Lambda Core and to the far side of the Moon. He projected such reassurance and a sense of hope the moment we entered the Omega Wing. He always knew what to do. He was always a step ahead no matter how desperate the situation. He never once lost his cool. Seeing him like this now was not only uncharacteristic, it was worrisome.

Captain Lawson stood straighter, shoving himself away from the chair he'd been leaning up against the last few moments, recognizing the stalemate in the highly-charged conversation. He took his queue and delivered a verdict into the muted ambiance.

"My heartfelt condolences go out to all the men and women of Lima Company. Gunnery Sergeant Smith was a good man, a good leader, and he was the bravest Marine I ever knew. His loss is terrible"

The Captain breathed deeply as he gaited away from the elevated command station, slowly descending the ramp into the expanse of people.

"We owe him a debt that can never be repaid, but at this stage, risking our best chance for success on anything but the greater good would serve no benefit to us or to him even if he had survived. The next decision is critical to the War effort and ultimately reflects our new purpose, and that purpose has become more than about us. It's about our neighbors. It's about the UNSC and its prospects for turning the tide. The best way to properly avenge Smith is to engage in only key battles one star system at a time. This here isn't our fight, as much as I'd like to stay and settle the score. It's not what he'd want. He would want to know you carried on and made your contribution, each one of you. And he would want you to do it under orders with precision and measured success, not haphazardly or as captives to the anguish we now suffer. For once, victory is possible following this discovery that Smith quite literally gave his life to secure. We should honor that. And while no one can guarantee victory, I can promise you this, Marines" You will have the chance to get the payback you deserve if you stay this course. I can see to it that you're still the tip of the spear just like before. How does that sound?"

Captain Lawson turned a tide in each of us. All eyes were fixed on his.

I could see everything change in an instant, every person resolved and resolute. Haze nodded firmly at the Ship Commander. I mulled over the Captain's words again and again. They sounded retributive whether he knew it or not, coming off almost like a reprisal not just for Gunnery Sergeant Smith but for millions of Zaragosans as well" an affirmation of human resiliency and tenacity. Tears were then shed by some, but they weren't merely cries of closure. There was a new mix of emotions now, rare combinations of acceptance and hope and determination circulating among Lima Company that were never before this potent.

Lawson nodded solemnly as he turned for the Captain's chair, retaking his seat slowly, glancing over the many faces in the bridge for another moment.

"As soon as our spot on the Moon rotates out of the Covenant's line of sight, we'll be underway. The orders given to me are to make best speed toward Reach at my discretion, but if no one here objects we'll make a few stops. I've been informed the Sigma Octanus system has been under siege. It's right on the way."

Lawson keyed commands into some of the controls populating his chair's armrests and the bow's blast shields began to contract over the viewport. In silence, Marines and Scientists shuffled toward the bulkheads, collecting their thoughts. A movement of its own accord commenced as Lawson began contemplating something. All non-essential personnel started to clear the deck and depart for their mainstays of the ship while the bridge crew waited at their stations. Moments later, a course was plotted to the Sigma Octanus system. The Thermisticles and all her hands entered the void of slipspace along with a new chapter of their lives.

* * *

><p>I made sure my battle uniform was in perfect condition, continuously glancing about it as I marched through the Thermisticles' quiet corridors. Various passerby offered little acknowledgement and were far less cordial than times before, and there was only one reason for that. Looking down at my garments again, I realized there wasn't much to scrutinizeâ€”just the rank insignia pinned to the lapels and some stitching for other compulsory items like nametape and unit patch which was likely to soon change. It was probable that right now someone was putting their artistic abilities to use in creating one. However, the shiny metal up top kept shifting in place, adding to the hindrance it recently became. Regs stated they had to be perfectly upright, squared to the deck. The service dress uniform I'd hung in my quarters moments prior was equally finicky, though more involved and much harder to keep clean.

Up ahead was the dead-center of the Thermisticles, her cylindrical chamber that I'd sought during my long trek to seek out the Captain. Like the next words I'd speak, many choices lied ahead depending on one's destination: up the shaft would lead toward the enlisted quarters, down to the officers' where the Scientists were, and among this level were the dwellings of the executive crew and the Captain himselfâ€”when not stationed at the Command Deck outside of his personal cryopod.

I knocked once as more troops passed by, again none of them favoring my presence following a recent all-hands meeting.

"Enter."

"Sir," I marched forth into the room, "Lieutenant Pennington reporting as ordered."

I found Captain Lawson already standing near a holo-display, the ambience dimmed. The beleaguered Ship Commander consulted reports with haste, looking like he was anchored there for some time. His hand gestures were swift and fluid as he swiped through the luminescent displays one after another like he was pre-programmed to do so, surely pre-occupied. Not glancing my direction though he acknowledged my presence, the answer came at a delay, "At ease,

Lieutenant."

I re-positioned to Parade Rest while he afforded himself another moment to deactivate the projection, motes of light particles fizzling out of vision a meter above the aperture.

"Alright, talk. I haven't got all day."

Thankfully, the Captain practically ordered me to speak freely, so I did.

"Sir, why me?"

It was only then that eye contact was established.

He looked at me quizzically as if I was a cadet of his currently under evaluation. "Doctor Kleiner's training session didn't give it away?"

"I understood the necessity of the training, sir, but what I can't understand is me bypassing years of progression and experience and having it flaunted in front of the others at your award ceremony. And you saved me for last. If you were trying to send a message, you definitely did."

"Good. Then it's established."

"They took it as a slap in the face, sir."

The Captain shifted his stance, squaring his shoulders directly at me. "Are you denying promotion, Pennington? Because if you are, tell me right now and I'll have you reassigned to another unit."

"Captain, Lima Company is my home. It's where I belong. A transfer to some other unit is the last thing I'd want. I am merely protesting your decision."

"Why? I never micromanaged you. I even respected the unit's traditions by letting Smith remain in-charge. Now that he's no longer with us, Lima Company needs an officer and someone will believe they're worthy enough to be its new leader. We've got a week-long journey to find out who it'll be if you decline. Plenty of time for me to make another decision." He looked away. "Still, my hopes are on you."

"I'm not the best choice."

"I'd rather it be you than bring in some butter bar fresh out of the academy who doesn't know a thing about the people in Lima Company. If not you, then some other enlisted in Lima Company will commission. Prior-enlisted always get the most respect from their troops."

"Then Staff Sergeant Rios is your man. A well-rounded Marine. One of the best shooters and was practically Gunny's right hand the whole time. He was next in line for leading us. He'd been groomed for the position months prior."

"I know all that."

"You had a peek at our unit history and our combat v-logs. Why not him?"

"Mostly for the same reason you were chosen to be the Transit's primary operator."

"How does one relate to the other, sir? I don't see the correlation."

"So what you're saying is that the merits I considered you on don't warrant the promotion?"

"Truthfully, no. There's a dozen who would deserve the same or better. Ask anyone. And a Private going straight to Lieutenant? Sir, that has no precedent in the UNSC, maybe even in the entire history of the Corps itself. It just doesn't seem right to any of us."

"These are unprecedented times. Decisions must be made and we have to work with what we've got. Your accession into the commissioned ranks is unconventional. However, it is strategically necessary to your unit, to me as your acting commander, and to the War in my judgment."

"Yeah, but sir, did you see their faces? I had to stand there in front of them and keep a straight face while you pinned those bars on my uniform. That was the hardest thing I've ever done, and now I'm catching some flak for it. It's like I'm a ghost now. No one talks to me anymore."

"For the better. Officers do not have the luxury of friends, certainly not among the enlisted. I'm sure you understand. Officers are leaders, held to the highest standards. We do not engage in fraternization, tolerate weakness, incompetence, or insubordination. You are now in command of Marines. Better get used to it."

"I heard someone say that I'm just going to be a relay. The mouth of the Ship Commander, they said. They think Lima Company will become errand boys just like before and I didn't disagree with them because truthfully it's how we all felt the whole time we were defending the Outpost."

"If the idea of service to the UNSC no longer appeals to some, then I can arrange for their transfers as well. You are their LT and they will follow your lead. I will fragment this unit throughout the inner colonies if that's what it takes to maintain some order and discipline on this ship. You can relay that to them, Lieutenant."

I remained at Parade Rest, waiting for him to say _dismissed. _It seemed there was little more to be said. He'd made up his mind. The people in the Company had made up theirs.

The Captain re-activated his holo-console, momentarily glancing at some reports before continuing.

"Frankly, I can't believe this restructuring has splintered you all. Lima Company is not some toy army living in its past. Lima Company completed its mission. I would hope that _all _of Lima Company understood the criticality of that mission. And I don't know why your

promotion is personal to them. Every Marine got promotions or awards or both, so no one should be feeling left out. Your engagements planetside and all of your accolades were fully vetted up and down the chain."

"What chain? Who do you report to? Up until a few days ago, we were patrolling cities and neighborhoods, then we get the call to defend some mining camp. Sir, we didn't even know you _existed _until Covvie started glassing the world and the only safe direction was down."

"It was just your turn. People need to start growing up and realizing that the needs of the UNSC always come first, whatever our predicament. We are all going to Reach together. Like it or not, the knowledge we all possess is classified under X-ray directive. Even if some of you are reluctant to continue what we started, then those unwilling few will just be collecting dust in some isolation ward until they die or we win the War...whichever comes first. Those are the only two options anyone has now, and that's coming from the very top."

"Is that what this is all about? We're conscripted for off-the-grid missions of your making? Some of the troops have openly questioned your authority in assuming permanent command of this unit. Enlisted morale is at an all-time low. Where are the actual orders? We haven't seen them."

Lawson's jaw clenched, though he nodded coldly in agreement. He could have easily reprimanded me for speaking so frankly or made annotations to my personnel file that would follow me wherever my duties carried me, but he chose amicability instead. His tone was even, calm, almost self-assured as if he'd already gotten his way.

"Understandable, Pennington, and justifiable. I understand the unit's concerns. I'll send you a copy of those orders my very next chance. Any other hot items before we're underway, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, I didn't mean to call you out. We know the importance of this mission and I'm sure most of us would get behind it, but we can't do it blindfolded again. We just can't. This time we're going to need a little clarity going forward. You're right about us—we're not some ragtag security detail, so we want to know what we're getting into. Don't just dangle carrots in front of us and say we'll be at the forefront again. Give us specifics. Give us a reason to go all-in and we'll do it. That's coming from everyone in Lima Company, sir. From the very bottom, to me, and now to you."

"...I'm going to agree with your terms. Thank you for the visit, Lieutenant. You and I will brief the unit on the other side. I suggest you all head to cryo and get some rest. We'll need it where we're going."

* * *

><p>As the men and women of the Thermisticles venture through the voids of slipspace, I reflected once more on the past and on our newfound purpose.

We triumphed the enemy's attempts to steal from us a weapon of great

magnitude. Fleeing was the only victory to be had in that fight, but a victory nonetheless.

Escape was only the beginning. Zaragosa Prime's embattled survivors found closure, solace, and a new calling. While we gave our all to defend one world, still an untold more were set before our path. My new place among the unit was yet another matter that would unfold in the times ahead. Altogether, I feel only graver choices loom, more double-edged swords that lie in wait as we follow our Captain into new tomorrows.

19. Rank and File

****Rank and File****

"So, Lieutenant Pennington, what do you think about us going to the Sigma Octanus system? You looking forward to it, sir?"

That was Enrique Rios, the most tenured Marine in Lima Company, recently promoted to Gunnery Sergeant and now the senior-ranking enlistee among us. Every one of us receivedâ€"earnedâ€"some kind of promotion following our actions at Zaragosa Prime. Even those belonging to Sierra Company were awarded accolades from Captain Lawson, who'd likely be encumbered with PERSCOM correspondence on the matters for quite some time to come.

The question sounded loaded and I sensed angst in his usually composed voice. I looked upward. He had his gaze trained on me waiting for the response, but before I even considered an answer I instead looked down at my own uniform, still incredulous of the sudden and unprecedented transition into command. The gold bar sewn to the placket of my battle dress was an everyday reminder that the title of Lieutenant still seemed like a gaffe thrown at me for lack of a more deserving candidate, like waking from a dream I wasn't sure was bad or good. Hearing 'sir' from anyone usually had me looking around for the Captain. I'd only gotten used to the title after four or five of those mistakes.

The Gunny regarded me carefully and I didn't mind being pressed for information like this. The current venue was surely crude, but as a prior-enlistee myself I could easily relate. How could anyone be sure of what we were getting ourselves into again? He would have legitimate concerns going forward, after all. He was senior enlisted, charged with immense responsibility. They'd look up to him as a mentor, a guide, a source of information. All the Marines seated at this particular mess table were to be the future decision-makers of Lima's tactical operations. They were the best suited to lead by Captain Lawson's determinations as well as my own upon accepting command of the unit.

But like me, they were wary of the role they were thrust into. Very few of us were properly indoctrinated and hardened over the customary lengths of time. Though, to be fair each of us had proved our prowess in actual combat and our unit persevered because of one another. By deed alone, each of us got what we deserved. The Captain had no other alternatives, regardless. All aboard the Thermisticles were the last survivors of our world.

Appearing worthy of Lima Company's approval would be an ongoing

struggle for me despite being the sole Marine selected to utilize the almighty Transit. I realized that all eyes at the table were fixed on mine now, no longer just the Gunny's. They'd come together on questions to ask beforehand, I gathered. I stole a swift gulp of coffee and quickly uttered, "Sigma Octanus? Well, we need a change. Gotta keep moving forward. It'll be good. I'm looking forward to real food again anyways."

I was terse. I had to be. If I had real information I would volunteer it to the senior ranking ahead of the upcoming briefings, but I had no information. Here I was, caught in the middle. There was nothing yet from the Captain, and all of Lima Company was growing more curious by the day. It wouldn't be in a company grade officer's best interest to tip-toe around issues, but there were so many at this point and addressing them during a meal proved rarely useful anyways. There was surely a better time and a place for this.

"Speaking of food, let's enjoy it for once." I nodded suggestively, glanced around the Mess, avoiding any eye contact with the Marines seated at my table.

Lima and Sierra were coping incredibly well. I could see it in their eyes, their body language. Despite us losing everything, they all moved with a sense of purpose. They would finish a meal and exit the Mess soon after, very few of them taking up chatter. They were considerate of those still waiting for space to sit down. The unit as a whole still felt like it had direction. No one of authority needed to intervene since we departed our derelict system, not once.

I realized that Gunny Smith would be sitting where I currently was, probably doing much the same as me in this moment: speaking with the senior ranking on enlisted morale, equipment shortfalls, and just enjoying the meal while joking and keeping an eye on others. It seemed none of that was necessary for the moment. The Captain, the Doctor, and their team of scientists always had a way of inspiring confidence and hope despite their elusive nature.

Even after everything that happened, we still possessed that all-too-critical hope.

But that was only my assumption based on appearances. I also had to rely on NCOs for feedback.

The room was a drone of conversation and silverware pinging against silverware and chairs sliding across the _Thermisticles'_ deck, all sounds echoing against her unforgiving bulwark. I enjoyed the noises, the small bouts of idle talk among the NCOs. I sipped some more coffee, lost focus on my surroundings and realized again that all eyes at my own table were still looking at me, and I set my tin down.

"Something wrong?"

"LT," Rios said, "the troops are getting curious as to what's going to happen. Where we're going, what we'll be doing. It's been three days since we left 'Gosa and we all remember being promised some much needed info. What's the mission?"

"Well, we're going to Sigma Octanus."

"Yes, and the Captain did mention we're going to engage some Covenant." Staff Sergeant Holmes remarked. "So, how much Covenant? Will we be rallying with other UNSC? Likeâ€¦what's the game plan?"

"I don't know any of that yet. I'm still waiting to get briefed by the Captain himself. Have any of you noticed any turbulence among the squads?"

Rios glanced at all the enlisted leaders seated among us before offering, "No, sir. Nothing. And that's why I feel we owe it to them to get them answers sooner than later. They've had to put up with a lot."

"What do you think he's waiting on?" Sergeant Haze asked. "Like Gunny said, it's been three days in slip space. Going on four, now."

"Gents, he probably has a _lot _on his mind right now. I say we remain patient. It's not just about us anymore."

"We can only remain so patient, LT. We've got lives, too. Even if they haven't said anything yet, I know some of the troops are rather anxious to find out if anyone they knew at Zagosa made it outta there in time. And some of us just want to reconnect with whoever we have elsewhere in the galaxy."

"Okay, I get it. Believe me, I get it. I've got family at Reach and I know they're waiting to hear from me. Same for everyone, I'm sure. Captain knows that. He's undoubtedly just as anxious, though we don't see him in a frenzy about it. I'll press for it when he's ready to see me. In the meantime, nothing changes who we are. We're Lima Company." I cracked a smile, winking at Haze. "The Illusionists. Only now we've been entrusted with even more responsibilities than before. You're NCOs, so get everyone on a regimen. Do what it is we do best. Prepare. And the only reason we're preparing is because we ain't fighting."

They all nodded firmly, the Gunny saying, "I'll see it done, sir."

* * *

><p>Following the morning meal, I received a message from Rosetta. The Captain had requested my presence. I marched toward the Command Deck with a sense of hope that we'd be given a clear path ahead.<p>

My visits to Captain Lawson weren't often, and I was never the initiator. I hadn't yet requested anything of him on behalf of Lima Company. Since our voyage, I always respected his situation, how occupied he always was in his own duties. The man wore so many hats: a scientist leading UNSC R&D efforts, a ship commander and field grade officer. How the man pulled it off was beyond me, but I could sense all that responsibility was going to wear him down eventually. I didn't know the state of his health and sleep habits, but surely they were lesser than my own at this time.

This was the burden of command.

Meetings with Captain Lawson were only at his behest and they were

highly structured and succinct, never any wasted time. They were tiny missions in themselves. Information to be relayed, orders to be passed down and seen done. Standards to be set and enforced on those I would never have thought of leading.

Upon my entrance to the Bridge, Rosetta announced, "Second Lieutenant Pennington on deck."

The Captain was already standing. Various civilians and a few Marines held position at the ship's sub-command stations, all engrossed in their tasks and oblivious to my presence. The Captain pivoted and placed his attention away from the others and nodded at me. "Have you decompressed, Pennington?"

"Yes, along with all the others, I'm sure. We're grateful for the change of pace."

"Good, though I presume that gratitude won't last very long because we're on the move again in short order. I hope you've all enjoyed every bit of it."

"Does that lead us to the next mission's in-brief?"

"Yes. Sigma Octanus." The Naval Captain then stepped toward the exit corridor where I currently stood and brushed past me. "Follow me to the Conference Hall."

He didn't waste any time elaborating as we left the vicinity of the Command Deck, walking with fast and long strides. This corridor was eerily silent, only the two of us occupying its length as we marched.

"The _Thermisticles _is entering normal space in thirty-six standard hours. Our itinerary takes us straight to Sigma Octanus Four and we'll be arriving there in the aftermath of a major invasion. Latest intel states low risk, though we've been asked for a favor upon our arrival."

"What's that, sir?"

"To investigate potential threats in the area. They've already cleared their world of Covenant presence, but I still consider our little errand to be of substantial importance to the Sigma Octanus system as a whole. We're venturing outward to investigate another planet in that star system, Sigma Octanus Two. This comes by request of Colonel Mattis, the acting head of Planetary Defense for the Sigma Octanus system."

"Should we be expecting hostile engagements, sir?"

"The Covenant never back down from a fight. They may flee temporarily, but eventually they turn up in force. We know that all too well. And the force that attacked Sigma Octanus Four was three to five times the size that struck Zaragosa Prime. You know what that means."

"Means there's something of interest here, too."

"That's correct. All assessments conclude the enemy is most likely staging reinforcements elsewhere in-system. See, I told you I'd make

you tip of the spear again."

"Aye, sir, you did."

"And now we're doubly prepared to stand up to the Covenant, alone if need be."

"Lima Company will be ready, sir."

"I know. That's why I've taken up Colonel Mattis' request. We can continue to grow Lima Company as a fighting unit and use the Transit to even greater effect, not to mention draw out any Covenant presence still in the shadows. But first, I'm going planetside to meet with the Colonel and I'm taking you with me."

"I'm going to be working with other senior officers?"

"Not quite, Lieutenant, but it's time to get you exposed to command duties. One of these duties includes acting on intelligence. This is the point in time that Lima Company starts to really take shape into the unit it was meant to be. Starting tomorrow, there will be a lot of information to absorb in the days and weeks ahead. Aside from commanding Lima Company, think of yourself as my shadow from here on out."

"I'm ready to learn."

"Good."

"What's first on the agenda?"

Lawson stopped short of the bulkhead before the Conference Hall and offered a rare smile. "Real food."

I followed him inward and the room was empty and silent save for a wide holo-display board flanked by high-backed chairs.

"The real food is at Sigma Octanus." He again smiled, finding a seat.

I remained standing, respecting protocol, assuming the position of Parade Rest just a few paces away.

"Now, there's a secret meeting that's been arranged. Local UNSCDF will be there, ONI officials, Highcomm officials. It'll probably be a short exchange and that's fine as we've got other stops to make, but I really needed us to make this one. The information being presented will be extensive, so I'm told. It's because of the hard work we've already done that Lima Company is getting access to this intel."

"What sort of intel?"

"I believe it is something that could end this War, Pennington."

"Sir?"

"Well, whatever it is, it's major. Someone anonymously summoned me there, and I think they were postponing this meeting until I could

arrive. Anyways, keep this information our secret for now and rest assured that we're getting something significant in return for our efforts."

"Understood, sir."

"You're dismissed, and have the unit ready to muster when we arrive."

* * *

><p>On the way to the ship's armory, I summoned the Gunny to meet me there. A few of the bulkheads offered clear windows but only the void of slipsapce was there waiting just outside the hull. Any minute now, the Thermisticles would make the transition to subspace and the view would change. I descended a loading ramp before the threshold to the armory and found the Gunny already waiting there along with Staff Sergeant Holmes and Sergeant Haze.

"Any news from the Captain?" He asked.

"Not much. Well, he's due to get a briefing from some senior officials at Sigma Octanus Four and then we should know some more."

"So," Haze began, "about five days and no clear direction. What are we going to do if we still have nothing when he returns from his briefing there?"

"It's going to get clearer as we progress, I know it. We're all going through the motions here, Captain Lawson included."

"Alright, sir. Guess we'll just have to see what happens."

"Gents," I said, "I have to be on the move. With you all as my witnesses, I'm going to store the Transit here in the armory before we head to ground."

I glanced about. There was only a Corporal at the CQ station, bored out of his mind. Though Rosetta could've easily surveilled the premises, Marine Corps regs mandated the continuous manning of critical facilities at all times. This was one such place.

"I'm storing this in the vault, Corporal."

He stood at attention. "Roger, sir."

He swung the heavy door open and I set the canvass bag down on a metal shelving unit inside the protected confines.

"What is it, sir?"

"Classified. When's your shift over?"

"Another couple hours, sir."

"Lock yourself inside and have someone fetch you some hot food, then get some good sleep. I have a feeling you're gonna need it."

Just then, Captain Lawson was patched in to our corridor's PA system

from the Command Deck.

"Lieutenant, what's the status on the Transit?"

"Stored in the armory as you asked."

"Good. If you see no objection, order your unit to take a day of shore leave as soon as we enter real space. They look like they need it."

"I know I say this on behalf of the Company. Thank you, sir."

"It's nothing. But I'll need you to stand fast. You're going under the knife."

"Under the knife, sir?"

"You're getting a neural lace installed down there. Stay behind and wait for me."

"Understood, sir."

I turned to face my NCOs.

"I want you with the troops as they make preparations to head to Sigma Octanus Four. Forget about anything mission-related and join them on vacation."

The Gunny nodded. "Aye, sir."

We parted ways and I headed toward the Command Deck. By the time I reached the Captain, the _Thermisticles _had already made the transition.

In orbit around Sigma Octanus IV, all seemed calm. There was a clear view outside the forward screen. There were no signs of Covenant activity, confirmed by Rosetta moments prior. Even from this altitude, I could see giant plumes of dust the size of cities hanging in patches and slowly churning like hurricanes. I could see networks of orbital tethers erected and ferrying supplies up and down. Space stations at the high ends gleamed in sunlight. Rebuilding on a massive scale was underway below.

"Okay," Lawson said, descending from his command station, "let's see what we can do for the UNSC."

* * *

><p>The Pelican touched down onto tarmac and the ramp opened. Sunlight and a cloud of dust swirled inward, showering my uniform. We strode down onto the taxiway and were escorted by a few local troops toward a walkway that exited the flightline, leading directly to our destination just a few hundred meter's walking distance. Other than a few mixed reactions from being in such proximity to a pair of Spartan supersoldiers, the escorting troops didn't say much, simply gestured onward. The path was fenced off on all sides with razor wire anchored to its outer surface for the entire length onward.<p>

Far beyond in either direction were patchworks of freshly-poured concrete foundations and construction vehicles helping to lay more

foundations. Electrical conduits snaked everywhere from some central power source and construction workers tapped in at various points, siphoning off energy for their heavy vehicles and power tools. The entire military base was rebuilding. The Covenant had leveled much of the installations here in their assault.

"The city got hit even harder." Lawson remarked as we approached our destination. "But I'm told they're on the rebound."

Though completely cordoned off like our pathway was, an area directly ahead appeared finished, replete with colorful landscaping and signage which read:

****SCIF 001-A****

****ATTENTION: YOU ARE ENTERING A RESTRICTED AREA****

****ONLY PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED BY THE INSTALLATION COMMANDER MAY PROCEED****

****UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL WILL BE DETAINED****

There were two entrances on either side of the building just a few more paces ahead, some sort of bunker by appearances. The gaps between windows were wide and the surfaces had no seams that I could discern. I rapped a knuckle against one of the window panes and I heard no sound in report. It was blast-proof to a certain degree. An irresistible itch then nagged at the back of my neck right where the surgical operation was performed two hours prior and I went to scratch at it. The lidocane anesthetic had already fully subsided, luckily with no lingering pain.

"It'll itch for a day." Captain Lawson said. He then grunted, or laughed, I couldn't be sure which. "Reminds me of the day I graduated OCS."

"You must be Captain Lawson." A man said from nearby. "You're the only one here wearing whites."

Leaning casually up against a railing, a soldier dressed in Army Class-A service uniform smoked on a cigar near a row of bench seating, eying Captain Lawson.

"Colonel Mattis, good to finally meet you."

The two marched toward one another and stopped to exchange handshakes.

"Yes, good to finally be putting names with faces. So, your ship's here with you? Theâ€"

"â€"_Thermisticles, _yes and a company of the finest Marines I've ever seen. Now that we're face to face, I'd like a favor from you as well before we attend this meeting."

"Name it."

"Wanted to tap your inventory."

"What is it you need to borrow?"

"Equipment and vehicles. All my troops are going into combat, so I'd also need a minimal amount of support personnel to stay behind."

"I don't see why not. Recovery efforts are steady here and have begun to taper out."

"It's going to be short notice, Colonel. I plan on checking out your second planet tomorrow."

"Really? I didn't expect it to be so soon. I could've had it ready for you right now if you mentioned it sooner."

"Wanted to ask you in-person. How soon can you have it all ready?"

"I'll put my best people on it once the briefing is through."

"The sooner, the better. I'm on a very strict timetable."

"Understood. Well, we'd better get inside and find our places."

Captain Lawson pulled the two Spartans aside, saying, "Why don't you post up on either entrance just in case strangers show up. This meeting is going to be extremely sensitive."

The two of them nodded and marched to each doorway.

The Colonel led us inward and flashed a badge at an MP posted inside the doorway. "These people are here with me."

The MP nodded and gestured toward an area with some free seats remaining. I chose a spot next to the Captain and looked around. I was the only one here in battle dress. I was also the only junior officer. High-ranking servicemen of all types were engaged in conversation, most of it informal by appearances. I watched two naval officers stare at one another for a moment before rushing to shake hands and reminisce about a duty station where they once worked together. It's a small military.

Like Captain Lawson, it was probable that very few of them knew their reason for being here. Despite such obvious compartmentalization, every branch of the UNSC seemed to have representation. Some were suit-dressed, clearly agents of some ONI branch. The space was well adorned in freshly-laid wood paneling and the climate control made it cozy. Further toward the back wall was a lengthy table, a small feast spread atop. Before I thought about getting up to partake, recessed lighting above had illuminated. Every window auto-darkened to pitch-black, choking off all outside starlight. The room then quieted down as a suit-dressed man walked to the central podium, glancing about the many faces for a moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, welcome to Sigma Octanus Four. With everyone now present, the intel briefing can commence."

The civilian then began accessing a datapad as enlisted personnel scurried about the room fetching discarded plates and silverware,

soon to be on their way into a back galley room.

The central holo-pillar projected an image of this planet, a pristine version of its former self before it was recently ravaged by Covenant.

Then, he began.

"While the UNSC Iroquois fought off an entire Covenant battle group, the UNSC Prowler Insidious was able to get in close enough to the lead enemy vessel and deploy a slip space probe aboard its outer hull just before it fled the system."

The room then hummed with murmur and speculation, all occupants wide-eyed as a translucent overlay was beamed inside my retinas from a nearby data feed automatically interfacing with everyone's neural lace. Fast scrolling intel reports were on one side while a static display of the spy probe being referred to was on the other. The briefing agent continued.

"Over the course of several weeks, ONI utilized the UNSC Slipspace Probe Area Network to track its whereabouts and query it for data gathering. The SPAN successfully relayed that critical data to analysts in near-real-time. What you will find in the encrypted data files I'm uploading to your CNIs are routine stops to a set of uncharted coordinates. These coordinates never changed throughout the surveillance period. What they were visiting was stationary. Access further and you will see corresponding images taken by the spy probe."

There was sudden lull in the room, a collective pause of both word and breath, and I immediately glanced at Captain Lawson upon seeing what could only be the most important vessel in the enemy's fleet.

The Captain whispered so lowly that I could barely hear it beneath the many side conversations now starting up again. "â€|It all makes sense now."

"People," the agent said, glancing at all, "extensive analysis has been conducted on these high-res images, spatial data recorded, and a wealth of intercepted transmissions. CINCONI has determined that what we're looking at here is a mobile command post. We now have a prime target. From here, an official from SWORD Command has the floor."

The Captain then left his chair and paced to the apex of the room, all eyes on him. Once at his place, he gave me a nod. I could only stare back in surprise.

He then took stock of the room and all the participants, relaxing his stance. "Uploading to your CNIs now are the data files of an alien artifact we discovered at Zaragosa Prime, our satellite base of research and development operations until its recent glassing. The device we have is believed to be of the same origin as the artifact retrieved by Spartan Blue Team here at Sigma Octanus Four, though it's assumed their functions are quite different from one another. It is my understanding that the artifact discovered here is currently undergoing analysis. The device excavated at Zaragosa Prime, however, has already been thoroughly studied and its function understood. The

Transit, the device, can quantize units of space-time itself effectively enabling teleportation."

"Teleportation?" Asked an elderly General seated in the middle of the room. "You're telling us you can send matter anywhere?"

"Well, not quite, General. Teleportation, yes, but there are practical limits to its capabilities."

"So, we're talking about another one of these discoveries at an alien digsite. It sounds like you've tested this thing."

"Yes, thoroughly. The specifics we've been able to observe in both controlled and uncontrolled scenarios are presented within my encrypted report. View them at your own pace, but understand the device cannot teleport matter limitlessly. Given the right operational parameters and objectives, however, this weapon system can be used to great effect. The intel presented today could be the catalyst for which this weapon system is ideally suited for. In my belief, we can neutralize this Covenant High Command vessel andâ€"

"â€"Hold on now." The flag officer interrupted. "Just hold on." He scratched at his scalp. "Captain, you can't spearhead an operation of that magnitude with a single source of intel, a single weapon system, and god only knows what else you're cooking up and expect success. Let's ponder this for a moment. Where's the pre-battle assessment analytics? Logistical inventory requests for something of this scope? And as for the weapon system itself, who will be using it? Where's the weapon's field manual? Does one exist? Is there a chain of evidence from third-party reviews regarding its operational capabilities? So far, only your organization has had possession of this thing and I haven't even heard of SWORD Command until today."

"We're fairly new, sir."

"I can see that. I'm scanning through your data looking for a CONOP and I'm not seeing one."

"Well, sir, that's what this meeting is all about. However I can sayâ€"

"â€"You can say what you want, but in the grand scheme it won't amount to much. Not enough to convince me, anyways. Until we get verdicts from commands outside your own, this is dead on arrival as far as I'm concerned, andâ€"

There was a plurality of reactions that made him pause and glance about the room. Particularly, it was the equally-tenured Generals of various other commands staring straight at him. Several others at the edges of the room shifted in their seats, exchanging glances between this General and Captain Lawson. It was easy to see that the majority, by appearances alone, was allied against this General's verbose appraisal of the situation. For the revelations presented here were incredible opportunities dropped into the UNSC's lap, free for the taking. Two of them. We had the best piece of intel anyone could hope to acquire these long thirty years of losing battles, and we had the perfect tool with which to exploit it. We could finally strike at a strategic target of incalculable worth.

We could finally inflict a mortal wound.

No more reacting to invasion after invasion. No more resorting to catastrophic and often futile colonial defense.

Captain Lawson was right.

"Look," the General resumed, again quieting down the ambient buzz, "Lawson, your realm is scientific research."

"I'm also a captain, a ship commander, and mission planner of Marine Corps Quick Reaction Forces."

"Well, I'm a general."

There was a small bout of laughter filling the room.

He continued, "Chief of Staff of the Marine Corps, to be exact, which means I speak among the most relevant people here concerning mobilization. I've seen it all, started at the bottom just like everyone else. Okay? This isn't something you just immediately ramrod into a full-on strategic assault. You're suggesting a substantial, one-time strike requiring massive, dedicated support that will likely be expended altogether when the day is done. Something this heavy takes months and many man-hours to plan, not to mention stage covertly. And even if it's properly planned and prepared, what if it's executed unsuccessfully? What if it fails? That's quite a bit of time and resources at stake to make that kind of gamble." He glanced about the room. "Let's all just catch our breaths here, yes? This is exciting news. It's the best news I've heard in a long time. It's truly the one-two punch we've been searching for. So, let's not rush in and screw it up!"

The General folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, suggesting to everyone that he'd said his piece.

Lawson glanced at everyone and nodded, unable to keep a straight face while letting the gravity of this entire news sink in.

I began to see various high-ranking individuals of all services and agencies glance at one another, nodding as well. Despite silence, there was consensus.

"Alright," said Lawson, "seems like we've got a lot of work and collaboration ahead of us. I'll be performing several live proofs in the days and weeks ahead, stopping at several commands along the way to Reach where I presume all of these inroads will lead. We'll need to rally the support of more than what we have here in this room alone. This will require Highcomm, every section of ONI, all colony commands, and others still. We need as much human and material support as we can muster in what will amount to the largest military operation the human race has ever devised. The General is right to be skeptical. There can only be one shot at this, which means it's all or nothing. With that, we need to convince every big hitter out there that this is real and that this could work with their contribution. Let's get on the phones and start making secure calls, get everyone off the bench and into action."

Wordless, everyone stood, immediately making their way to the exits.

The only sounds were the short, staccato footfalls of low quartered shoes tapping against the parquetry, an orderly stampede of commissioned officers. I got up and followed the crowds outward, eventually finding Captain Lawson shuffling through the door. Once outside, he donned his cap again and nodded at the Spartans standing guard on either end of the bunker, waving them onward as the various attendees filed out into the light of a star about to set over the horizon. The four of us regrouped beneath the dust-ridden covered walkway that would take us back to the Pelican.

"Wow, sir, that went extremely well from my perspective."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Pennington."

"How long was that meeting in the works?"

"Not long after we discovered the Transit and reported our earliest test results."

"Seems the events at Sigma Octanus and Zaragosa were connected by fate."

"Luck, fate, whatever. The UNSC might just be going on the offensive and that feels great."

"Aye, sir. When can I give Lima Company the good news?"

Lawson stopped walking. He turned to face me and made eye contact.

"I wouldn't do that. There will be a time for it, but it's not now."

"Sir, I just can't help but think of what it would do for morale. It would be such a major, long-lasting boost."

"I know. Your heart's in the right place, but this is all about using our heads just like that old General suggested."

"Do you suspect anything of the Marines, sir?"

"No, I don't doubt their integrity. Not after all they endured. It's where we're headed in the meantime that's got me concerned. It might take the wind out of their sails if you give them any."

"Why's that, sir?"

Lawson resumed to the trek back to the starport. I followed alongside, the Spartans walking in lockstep.

"Like we established in the meeting, this grand operation won't take shape overnight. While the planners plan and get all the details ironed out, you'll be taking Lima Company through some of their own trials if you're to be a part of the big plan. If you're to take part in the strike, which I intend you do, you'll need to train for itâ€all of you. I plan on making you leader of a specialized infiltration team that will ultimately destroy this mother ship of theirs. But before the operation gets any wings, people of the highest grades will inevitably weigh in and steer it to its eventual course. We won't be the ones deciding how this whole thing plays out.

In the end, we're all beholden to Highcomm. The only thing we can do in the meantime is present ourselves as the preeminent force best suited to lead the charge. Besides, most of those guys at the briefing were ONI or military attaché's working for ONI. Better to just let them take you under their wing, especially when they're controlling the purse strings."

"They funded your project?"

"Mostly. Enough of it that they essentially own it if they wanted to make a stink about it. A necessary action. Call it symbiotic. Without them, Doctor Kleiner would've been somewhere else, working on something else. You see, R-and-D folks like me and the Doctor are hard-working, patient, resilient, and hopeful above all. But these typesâ€|they just want instant results. They're used to evaluating toys that go boom and make things explode. To them, if you don't have a ready-made system sitting on a shelf just waiting to be used, they could care less about anything else. But we're past that now. The Transit is ready to be shown to the powers that be. The UNSC has wanted to field any disruptive technologies it could get its hands on for a long time and now we'll deliver. Once they finish reeling over the shock we'll surely give 'em, they'll green light us for this final mission. Realize Lima Company's true potential."

"What about that technical brief you had encrypted and Lima Company's classified after-actions reports on the subject?"

"I would agree with you. For me, it's enough, but guys like these also have a time budget. Reading data points and first-hand accounts is not the same as a dog-and-pony show. They need to see it. Seeing is believing."

"Seems like you've planned more than you let on, sir."

"Well, as much as I can, but some things can't be planned for."

"Like that General?"

"I think a healthy dose of skepticism has its own benefits. Keeps us in check. And speaking of keeping us in checkâ€|"

Colonel Mattis was on approach.

"What did you think of the briefing?" Lawson asked.

"If the operation you proposed today comes to fruition, we'll all be grateful. The UNSC needs this and I hope you get the backing it deserves. I've been ordered to Earth, myself. We're standing up a new unit there, so I'll have my work cut out for me. But if I can be of any use, you let me know."

"Maybe I'll start up a petition." Lawson grinned.

"I'll be happy to add my signature. So, you're off to Reach to pitch the big plan."

"Aye, Colonel. Once we're through investigating the number-two planet."

"Well, good luck out there and if you ever find yourself on Earth, pay me a visit. Hopefully it'll be post-war. With us as the winner, obviously."

"Obviously."

"Take care, Captain, and God's speed. I'll have your requests carried out in full."

"Good luck to you too. Maybe someday soon I will pay you a visit."

They shook hands and together we left the Army Commander behind.

Ahead now was the broad courtyard before the starport, our shuttle the only vessel atop the taxiway being refueled.

"Now, as for the next mission, you'll be taking Lima Company to ground when we deploy, Pennington." Captain Lawson consulted a data tablet as we marched. "I've prepared for you a mission overview and some specifics. Study and memorize them tonight because tomorrow starts the mission clock. We're on a strict timetable from here on out."

"What about Sierra Company?"

"I can't afford for any of them to have opportunities to leak news of the outpost or the device to people outside our operation, so effective immediately Sierra is now absorbed into Lima. They're without command and structure and they need a home anyways. It's easier and it just makes sense. Do you have any reservations commanding them, Lieutenant?"

"Not at all, sir. Hell, Sierra Company fought right alongside us. We're basically family."

"Good. Consider it official."

"I'll inform them."

"I'm placing this ground-op in your hands, Lieutenant Pennington. You're calling the shots."

"Transit and all?"

"Yes."

"That's heavy, sir. Are you sure about this? What if I make mistakes?"

"Mistakes are inevitable, but your unit will back you up. I have no doubt. It's time I throw Lima Company into deep water to see if it can swim."

* * *

><p>I had no time for myself after downloading the Captain's pre-mission brief. Once I read it, I knew preparations needed to happen quickly.<p>

First on my agenda was to review the status of supply requests. Colonel Mattis was extremely generous. Lock, stock and barrel, he agreed to everything we'd asked for, offering not only his own people and property to Lima Company but calling in favors from others at Sigma Octanus IV as well. We had access to the supply manifests of at least a dozen other Army units in the star system. What caught my eye in particular were surplus ODST combat harnesses and an AC-220 Heavy Gunship, otherwise known as a Vulture. The colossal war bird was a rarity to find these days, especially one in such good repair. This one's service record revealed not even a single caveat to combat. It was mint as the day it was assembled.

Merely two hours later, a UNSCDF Pelican entered the _Thermisticles' _launch bay laden with supplies from the planet below. Right behind it was the Vulture coming into view, poised further beyond like a giant sea predator chasing some smaller prey item. A grin forced itself on my face as I observed them taxi inward from beyond airlock windows. Once the bay doors sealed shut, I cycled through and guided them closer. As their engines spooled down to an idle, I met the pilots and accepted responsibility of the shipments. Non-combat technicians filed out by twos carrying boxes containing what I assumed to be the ODST gear I requested.

"You can drop all that stuff at the armory."

The pilots boarded their Pelican, one breaking from their formation and staying behind to operate the Vulture.

"How much seat time have you got with that beast?" I asked, glancing over the insignia on his uniform.

"Couple hundred hours, sir."

"Sounds adequate. We could be getting into some trouble down there, Chief."

"What do you think the odds are? Been waiting for some payback."

I smiled. "Good odds."

"Just tell me what to do when the time comes."

"Sounds good, Chief. Make yourself at home aboard the _Thermisticles._"

I double timed it out of the launch bay and caught up to the new personnel headed to the armory and supervised the inventorying and inspection process. Once all the gear was hung up on racks, the techs departed for their new homes aboard the _Thermisticles._

Sergeant Haze entered and found me afterwards, looking like he'd been searching specifically for me for a while.

"Well, LT, are we still just treading water?"

"Nope. We're definitely picking up steam now, as you can see."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, we've got destinations. First one is Sigma Octanus Two. Once we're finished there, we're on a timetable. Apparently a pretty swift one."

"Where are we headed?"

"A few places, eventually to Reach."

"This sounds a little familiar, like I've heard it once before. How long are we staying at these places and what are we doing there?"

"Wellâ€"

"â€"He didn't tell you." Haze shook his head.

"In all fairness, it is a lot of info and it's better to parse through the information as we go. And no, I don't know of every single place he plans on visiting, but we'll support him nonetheless."

"How long will this continue before NCOs need to take this up directly with him?"

"You don't want to do that. You know he's protocol-heavy."

"You gotta give me something, sir."

"Didn't I? We had a day of shore leave."

"Aye, one day is fine but not enough to hold a decent conversation. Some of us have family clear on the other side of the galaxy."

"I know it's not always fair for everyone. We could at least send messages, though. It wasn't a total loss, right?"

"What kind of big thing is gonna happen? We've been waiting to hear it."

"â€|All I can say is that it's a very important operation to the UNSC and we'll be in the center of it. Tip of the spear just like the Captain promised. I'm sorry I can't give more info on it. I wish I could."

"So you say there's big missions, we're a key player, and in the same breath you say you haven't got any info on it."

"You're not mad at me for it, are you?"

"Ohâ€|no man. No way. We're totally not getting the run-around again. I mean, even though that's exactly what we got at Zagosa from the same exact Captain, it doesn't mean we need to know what we're fighting for after the fact, right?"

"Haze, we know what we're fighting for. The device they discovered. What could be a turning point in the War."

"Do you ever feel that the Captain is leaning on you just a little too much?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you're so new at this. You're a brand new officer with essentially zero experience at it. Lima Company has become like his personal army and I don't think he'll have any problems using us just like he did at Zagosa, and you would be like the perfect tool in his box of tools."

"I don't think that at all, and I'm still not sure what you're getting at."

"Well, sir, you've got to stand up for us. You may be his Lieutenant, but you're also our Lieutenant."

"Please, don't tell me how to do my job. I think I know a thing or two about looking after this Company."

"Well, some of us are wonderingâ€|"

"Wondering what?"

"Oh, sorry, gotta get more info from the troops. I'll get back to you on that some time."

The Sergeant spun around and was about to leave when I stopped him short.

"In the meantime, Sergeant Haze, inform the Company there's an all-hands brief tonight at nineteen-hundred hours at the range."

Haze saluted, clenched his jaw and walked out of the armory.

In came Corporal Struger, nodding at the Sergeant as he withdrew.

"Hey, sir. What's all this stuff? New toys?"

"The finest toys. You'll hear all about it later tonight."

"Hey, sir, have you been getting enough rack time? You look a littleâ€|taxed."

"Too much time out here in space, Corporal Struger. One day groundside just wasn't enough. I'm sure you know what I mean. Been dealing with a lot of stuff lately, too. Ready to push on, you know?"

"I think we all are. Maybe we'll get in some trigger time soon, sir. Take out some Covvie and not even give them a proper burial."

"Aye, let's hope." I smiled.

* * *

><p>I paced up and down the length of the only live-ammo targeting range the ship had. It was just one lane, all by itself. VR ranges were cheaper to use, cheaper to maintain, and required no backstops. VR ranges were just as accurate as well, but they could never mimic

the intimidation and visceral feel of a weapon pointing downrange annihilating old-fashioned paper targets. Live-ammo ranges also provided troops the opportunity to disassemble and clean their weapons afterwards. Currently, I used the space for the pre-mission brief, all of Lima Company lined up against either wall. I wouldn't have to shout in the confines and it provided a more personal atmosphere, allowing them to get intimate with the details of the briefing. Everyone standing ensured there would be no nod-offs.<p>

"Are we dropping in ODST pods?" Sergeant Haze asked.

"No, we'll be ferried in by Pelican, but this new gear is specially made for exo-atmospherics."

"Is that the mission, sir?"

"No, we're going groundside."

"Why these then?"

"I ordered them just in case. Anything could happen and I want the best of the best, people and equipment, just how Gunny Smith always had it. Now, for anyone not originally part of Lima Company, you know by now that you are indoctrinated into X-ray directive. I'm talking to you, Sierra Company. By participating in these missions and all subsequent, you're agreeing to compartmentalization and non-disclosure. Consider all knowledge past, present and future to be classified unless made unclassified by Captain Lawson himself. Now, the missionâ€|

I began to pace the full length of the range, and back again.

"Parent units lost contact with the UNSC _Boxer _and all her hands approximately one month ago at the planet Sigma Octanus Two. It's a derelict world, thick jungle, overgrown, a diverse set of indigenous, non-intelligent wildlife. The only thing of danger known about the place is some of the terrain and the fact that Covenant are confirmed to have at least visited and engaged UNSC there."

"How do we know there's Covenant still there?" Asked Gunny Rios.

"We don't, Gunny, but we do know that's the reason the _Boxer _went down. Our mission is a combat search and rescue. I'm sending in two teams with two on standby in case our cover gets blown. This will be largely boots on the ground. Once we're offloaded, all deployed Pelicans will loiter throughout the duration of the mission with the support of a Vulture on loan from Sigma Octanus Four."

"What else did they lend, sir?"

"Sergeant Haze, everyone, please hold questions until the briefing is completed. Orbital scans detect intermittent IFF transponders, but Rosetta is having a hard time pinpointing due to some recent geo-magnetic storms in this quadrant of the system. They could just be transponders belonging to KIAs, but we're going in nonetheless. Primary objective is to hone in on those signals once we touchdown and search for survivors. Secondary is to neutralize any Covenant we encounter. This doesn't appear to be a world the Covenant devoted

significant resources to, according to the brass at Sigma Octanus Four. That or the _Boxer _failed to report a larger hostile force than it initially encountered. Either way, we're going in light weight but with a heavier presence in reserve if necessary. Questions? Yes, Sergeant Haze."

"Who are all the new faces we have aboard?"

"Mostly Army technicians on loan to the _Thermisticles. _They're here to help maintain the extra vehicles and equipment we've picked up."

"Any word on whether or not they'll be loaning us any prior-enlisted Lieutenants? Ones with some experience?"

A murmur of voices circulated in the room.

"Are there any other questions? Yes, Corporal Struger."

"Sir, what's our timeline out there?"

"I think we'll adhere to what the CSAR field manual states. Otherwise, we'll just play it by ear. I'll need routine communications from fireteam leaders down there on troop and supply conditions. Don't anybody hesitate to relay any concerns, no matter how small they are."

"Sir," Gunny Rios asked, "Did any of the more recent scans detect Covenant?"

"Negative, Gunny, though I hasten to add that there could be a residual force bedded down there waiting for a search party like us to show up. We're treating this as a full-blown combat op, so gear up smart and be ready for anything."

Silence and stillness as I glance over the Company, finally resting my gaze at Sergeant Haze.

"Alright, everyone, fall out and prepare for combat."

* * *

><p>"Entry vector stabilized." The pilot announced. "Passing through the ionosphere. Touchdown in ten minutes, Lieutenant."<p>

"Roger." I said. "Is there a bead on any IFF transponder?"

"Nothing yet, sir."

"Keep me posted."

"Lima Company," I broadcasted throughout TEAMCOM, "Ten minutes to dirt."

There wasn't any turbulence so far, then it happened as we hit the highest reaches of atmosphere, and I could only think that just two weeks ago I was falling through a Zaragosan sky along with the rest of Lima Company on a mission that would change our lives forever. We'd lost good people, but that was just Lima Company. A whole planet was glassed along with countless other inhabitants. Here we were now

in another star system, deployed yet again into the unknown, only this time the Captain and the Doctor were not in complete control.

"Sir," the pilot said, "Long range sensors have an IFF transponder a about thirty klicks away. It's registered to a Pelican dropship. It's patchy, but it's there."

"Alright, continue to hone in on that signal and make it our LZ."

"Roger, sir."

"And keep scanning for anything, UNSC _and _Covenant."

Our vessel pitched and rolled into a mild bank and throttled to a higher speed.

"Alright, Lima," I announced, "We've got a Pelican on the ground and we're en route. Could be survivors there. At dirt, fall out and establish a perimeter. Looks like we may've gotten lucky this time."

Marines remained restrained in their harnesses while making their last minute preparations, and within minutes I sensed deceleration and a yawing. Soon after, we made our descent. Downward firing thrusters now drowned out my hearing as the tail ramp opened up, revealing the light of day and a plume of dust rising from below. I could smell the dirt and surrounding foliage, and as soon as my eyes adjusted the belly of our craft touched to the ground with a thud and I snapped free of my restraints. All other Marines followed suit and filed out of the ship's blood tray by the twos.

Once outside, I scanned the periphery. Other squads filed out of other grounded Pelicans in our formation. Far away, I caught sight of the Vulture descending atop a mesa about two kilometers distant. There wasn't enough space for it nearby. I then looked for the unknown friendly vessel.

"LT," Gunny Rios shouted, "over here!"

I ran to the Gunny as he pointed to our target.

"Down there, on top of that outcropping."

I followed his outstretched arm to where it aimed. Resting at the edge of a cliff was the Pelican, its tail ramp open. I could see there were some supplies strewn about its perch, all dust-ridden and grey.

"Looks barren."

"We could probably hike there." Rios said. "Looks to be a way to it from above."

"Sounds good. Rally the troops on you and get us to that bird." I looked back to the Pelicans, made eye contact with the lead pilot. "Go ahead and RTS to scoop up reinforcements if we need them."

"You want us groundside afterwards, sir?"

"Negative. Remain sub-orbital and hold fast there. Don't want to advertise us more than we already have."

"Roger, returning to station."

As the Pelican formation ascended, Lima Company regrouped on the Gunny's lead and began the trek through this world.

* * *

><p>"All clear!" Rios shouted.<p>

Lima Company had fanned out and secured the perimeter. Troops were posted thirty meters in each direction, scanning the area with scoped weapons. I hopped down from a giant boulder leaning up against a shallow rock face and thudded into the outcropping the Gunny first laid eyes on at touchdown. The area was quiet as a gentle breeze pushed some weeds into a sway. Discarded MRE wrappers and spare ammo cartridges littered the ground. Open supply crates were still standing upright despite any wind gusts. There was no one here except us.

"What do you make of this, Gunny?"

Rios removed his helmet and wiped some beads of sweat away with his forearm. The climate here was subtropical, the orbit closer to the host star than that of Sigma Octanus IV.

"Everyone, hydrate!" He first called out. "Hard to say. It's not a crash landing. Hull looks to be in great shape. Insides are no worse for the wear. Systems aren't locked down or anything. I don't think the Covenant have been here. As for the pilot and crew, I just don't know. Maybe they fueled up on MREs here and made a break for the jungle down below. Maybe they were in search of water after they drank all theirs away."

I shuffled to the edge of the outcropping and looked out into the valley far down below. "Hell of a landing, anyways." I muttered.

I looked back at the whole of Lima Company. Most were covering our exit, scanning for any sort of activity in every possible direction.

"Gunny, have the men take a rest. There's nothing here."

"Roger, sir."

"And have a tech team patch into the avionics and flight data recorder. Maybe there's something of interest we can recover."

Every Marine found some sort of seat. A chair in the derelict Pelican's cargo bay, a patch of weeds, a smooth bolder top, anything. Everyone had their own way of passing time when not on sentry duty. Time was elapsing and I had to find a way forward. I sat back against the co-pilot's chair and stared beyond the windscreen, seeing mostly sky and a small swath of jungle at the lowest reaches of the clear pane. I swept a hand over the rough surface of the riveted instrument cluster, wondering what to do next. It was then upon staring at the Pelican's radio that the way forward came to me.

"Staff Sergeant Holmes, can you get some SIGINT on the area? See if there's any more IFF tags present?"

"Yes sir." He nodded and made for the geo-location gear someone had stashed away in a rucksack.

"Hey, Holmes." I reached out a hand. When the rifleman turned back, I clutched at one of his pauldrons. "Did your arm every heal?"

"Yes, sir. I'm full up. Thanks."

As the Staff Sergeant withdrew to his new task, Gunny Rios crashed down into the pilot's chair, shrugging.

"Sir, there's nothing unusual we can find in the ship's data recorder. It's like the aircrew didn't want to leave any clues behind. All we have are flight telemetry statistics."

"Their mission must've gone as planned then. They were either captured here or they simply ran out of sustenance and headed into the bush. Scan whatever orbital imagery the _Thermisticles_ took for rivers and lakes. If we can find fresh water, there's a good chance we can find them if they're still alive."

"Aye, sir."

I accessed the Pelican's instruments and powered on the main breaker, observed a twenty percent battery life remaining. All engine fuel was exhausted, reading empty. There was no chance of recharging the battery then. I entered in the long-haul communications frequency that would radiate signals back to the _Thermisticles_. _Hopefully_ with whatever charge remaining I could radio a voice message back to the ship and provide a sit-rep. The Pelican's high-powered amplifiers and larger antenna could surely provide more transmit distance than our handheld equipment. Before I could even determine what the message would say, good news luckily came.

"Lieutenant Pennington!" Holmes shouted. "More IFF signals!"

The Staff Sergeant came rushing up to the ship's canopy and said, "Here, look!" He handed me a data tablet with a set of blips pulsing on and off in the display. "These coordinates can't be more than ten clicks away, sir. And they're all clustered together."

Rios and I glanced at one another.

"Ten clicks away and at that bearing, sir," the Gunny said, studying imagery archives in his own tablet, "that overlaps a water source. They're not too far from a streambed."

I climbed out of the canopy. "That's our waypoint, then. Give the men ten more minutes to collect their things. We're on the move again."

* * *

><p>Lima Company found a path down into the jungle, most of it a wide trough cut into the slanted rock face, the imprint of an ancient ice flow, maybe. There were other waterfalls in the area at extreme

distance, their silvery bands glaring in the light of the day as they turned perpendicular. Loose gravel awaited us at the bottom which gave way to a dry, cracked basin. Once to the bottom, we could see the basin's floor slope gently upward a kilometer away, transitioning into the region of jungle that dominated much of this world. Tall trees swayed in the wind. Instinctively, we all knew anything could be out that way lying in wait.<p>

We baked in the sun as we crossed the hard, unforgiving sink. One kilometer of marching felt more like five at the current pace. Not a single troop complained, though, and at one hundred meters before the transition to jungle I ordered the Company to hydrate.

"Drink up." I broadcasted. "We're still in for a long walk yet."

A minute later, I signaled the march onward and together we crossed into the first line of bush. It wasn't as dense as I first thought, the greenery tapered to just a few trees here at the edge. Another hundred meters, however, it turned from sparse shrubbery into a tangle of limbs and branches.

"Alright" I radioed to TEAMCOM, "Delta Formation. Keep your wits about you."

Lima Company morphed into an attack posture, the wedge-shaped omen of impending death.

The looming forest began to grow larger around us and the ambiance darkened. I checked the local time for this planet. At our latitude, sundown would occur in five hours. As the density of this place became apparent, I activated the suit's VISR at the expense of more energy consumption. The low light level imagery system compensated my frail, human vision accordingly.

"Anyone know at what distance these IFFs should be showing up in our HUDs?" I asked.

"Hard to say." Holmes responded. "Last text message from the Captain says Rosetta is still reporting coronal mass ejections up above. Could last for days."

"Is it affecting long-haul comms?"

"Yes, heavily."

"Can we still scan the IFFs accurately on the surface?"

"It's hit or miss. It would help if I had a better line of sight to their location."

With the aid of a rifle barrel, I pushed aside a pair of tree limbs directly in my path. "I don't think that's going to happen any time soon."

"With no way to communicate, should I call in air support to follow us in?"

"No, we still need to keep the element of surprise if there's any Covvie here. We'll just have to improvise. Use simple text for communications. No audio." I then broadcasted to all of Lima, "Stay

alert and let's close in on the new IFFs."

* * *

><p>Two clicks inward and the terrain had already drastically changed on us.<p>

Berms shot up everywhere, limestone formations with underground river systems bloating the rock upward beneath our feet. Everyone tried to gain the high ground wherever possible as we progressed, but some were forced into the trenches in between due to the land-nav guiding principle that you _never form up in a straight line _when scouting an area. Not that the high ground yielded those above any advantage either as the jungle grew even thicker now, nourished even more so from the nutrient-dense aquifers below.

Our pace had further slowed due to the constant elevation changes. Lima Company troops were getting taxed with each rise and fall of the land they traversed. The only two in our formation that hadn't slowed one bit were the Spartans, who had been silent the entire mission. I took it this meant they approved of my leadership abilities thus far. Otherwise, one of them would have consulted with me by now. They were well within their rights to do so as ONI Commandos working directly for the Captain.

My attention suddenly focused to one of the Spartans who assumed the point of the formation.

Their fist was raised high in the air. The tell-tale red diamond shone brightly in my HUD.

"Halt." I broadcasted.

I walked slowly to Adrian's position, minding my path to get to him, sidestepping fallen twigs and loose rocks. The breeze in the air could at least drown out some of the sounds we had already made as a group. The ODST ensemble Lima Company now had was much more capable than our old polypropylene uniforms which merely had active charcoal as scent filters. The current gear was o-ring sealed and could be pressurized with its own internal atmosphere if required, which I immediately activated. All of Lima Company followed suit. If enemies were ahead, there was a good chance we hadn't alerted them to our presence.

And they were ahead.

"See that?" Adrian asked me.

"What is it?"

"Covenant war party. Amy was right. You are one lucky Marine. We're right at the tail of their formation. Must be going in the same direction we are."

"What do you recommend, Spartan?"

Adrian stared on for a moment, thinking the question over.

He glanced sidelong at me.

"If it were me in command of Lima Company, I'd follow them. Let them take me to their camp."

"Good idea. That's what we're going to do."

I turned and glanced at as much of the formation that I could, parts of it obscured among the vast network of mounds dotting this area. I broadcasted, "Covenant right in front. I need you all to go as stealthy as you can from here on out. We're gonna creep on them for a while. Do not break stealth unless it's life or death. Radio silence unless life or death. The Spartans have tactical command. Over and out."

The VISR application was the only reason I chose to take the point with the Spartans. I could see farther ahead. We walked slowly like stalking predators, mindful of our own presence much more so than theirs. I risked a quick glance over my shoulder, studying our own formation meandering up and over the wooded knolls. The sight of a whole Company displaying such stealth pleased me in some way that Gunny Smith would've lauded, I imagined. Then, a swift, red diamond flashed in my HUD and I whipped my attention toward the front again, witnessing Adrian holding another first high in the air. The entirety of Lima Company stopped moving. Not risking any movement whatsoever, I chose to hail the Spartan on a private channel.

"Status?"

"They've stopped. Taking a break or something."

"What do you want to do?"

"Let's wait until they resume, then follow them some more."

Amy looked at me and nodded. They'd already had consensus on this.

"What about our IFF targets?"

"We can still get to those. This patrol group in front of us will have to report in to their superiors at some point and I recommend we exploit that."

"You're sure they'll be regrouping with a larger force?"

"Look at them. It's only a few Grunts and Jackals. There's got to be at least one Elite in the area supervising their movements. We need to follow these ones home and get an idea of just how much Covenant we're dealing with."

"Roger that."

"They're on the move again."

"Roger."

A green blip was broadcasted, followed by a series of yellows indicating stealth remained the priority.

The formation resumed on the Spartans' lead.

Another berm was ahead, this one much more prominent than all we'd encountered before. At a forty-five degree slope by my estimation, it shot up ten meters to where it leveled off flatly, the enemies in front trekking up its steep incline. The jungle seemed to thin out at its base, though I couldn't be sure what the picture looked like beyond it. The base was wide, stretching for hundreds of meters in either direction almost like a wall. This wasn't a berm. It was a mesa. It was the start of new topography, a new region of the planet.

Amy and Adrian stuck a solid red diamond on everyone's HUD and there it remained while the two of them climbed up the slope. Not one sound could be heard from their movements. Less than a minute and they were back down, walking toward me.

"What's your recommendation, Spartans?" I asked over the private channel. "Should we send flanking teams to the top and pincer the bastards while we scale the center?"

"No, there's no need for that. We got lucky today. They took us right to their encampment. Order the standby team to breach atmosphere and drop ordinance just ahead of our position, danger close."

"Sounds a lot safer. What coordinates do you want us to convey to the gunships?"

"Doesn't need to be complicated. Just make it a full grid box."

"I'll have it done."

I looked rearward and waved Holmes up to my position.

"What's the word, sir?"

"Holmes, call in the backup team and tell them to rain down hellfire on one standard-sized grid in front of us. Blast these motherfuâ€".

"â€"Contact!" Someone shouted.

Our perfect surprise attack was doomed to fail before it could begin. Plasma bolts of all variety arced downward and I could barely see the dirt slope in front of me once the dust started to scatter. I could only see flashes of light and weapon shrouds pointed downward. Instinctively, all troops flung their bodies toward the face of the berm and returned blindfire upward. Those who co-witnessed the first salvo had already primed grenades and were waiting for a break in the oncoming fire to toss them up and over. Sniper shots instantly rang out in succession further back behind the cover of berms, the jungle itself responding with their thunderous echoes.

Just as soon as it started, the lull came. Silenceâ€"only a brief moment of silence occurred as the Marines who kicked off the skirmish hesitated for a few seconds, regaining their bearings, sweeping their aim to find a definitive target. Howling then resounded, seeming to emanate from above, areas adjacent, the thick canopy, everywhere. Covenant Jackals and Grunts materialized from their cover, peering down at us from above. In an instant, the firefight resumed, the

Covenant opening with bursts of plasma and needler rounds. The pink, crystalline shards ricocheted off tree trunks and the berm faces behind us, splitting into microfragments that broke apart and grazed a few troops harmlessly.

One Marine came under combined fire from two or three of the attackers and went down with a shot square to the armor covering the collarbone. Wild shots skimmed just over the top of his helmet milliseconds after he crashed into the dirt. By some measure of luck, he was spared death.

"Gamma Squad," I shout to the Marines at my sides, "flank wide and toss frags over that berm! Take whatever help you need with you!"

They bolt from their positions and into the last reaches of thickets before the steep rise. I return fire hastily to cover their maneuver, merely suppressive bursts without an intended victim. I can only hope that my effort scores a hit at some opportunistic enemy trying to send more plasma downward. After scanning the line above, I present as small a target as possible, pressing my helmet into the sloped dirt while unlimbering the Transit. The forest is now a deafening roar of rifle shots, shouting, screaming and scurrying as ally and enemy scramble for cover and better vantage.

"Someone please radio the Vulture over here."

"Radio can't cut through!" Holmes shouted.

"Find her with that ball of black magic you got there!" Haze screamed.

With not even the time to glare at the Sergeant, I did as he suggested and searched the sky, widening the display again and again, scanning. Nothing yet as squawks and screeches echo throughout the land, more enemy reinforcements signaling one another in their own languages. I can hear them between bouts of gunfire. A lone Grunt materializes at the crest of the slope with two grenades already ignited in its flailing hands, running at full speed for our center. Before I can take full stock of the threat, someone shouts, "Full contact! Twelve o'clock high!"

All rifles vector fire in that direction and the attacker simply disintegrates in an instant. The handheld explosives fall against the berm's face and detonate after rolling downward, sending scintillating radiation towards us and yielding nothing more than a brief show of static electricity in our HUDs.

"Everyone dislocate!"

I shout the order with a hoarse, burning throat, hoping to overpower the noise and chaos and decentralize our formation before another suicidal enemy breeches our perimeter.

I refocused in on the display of the Transit, peered into its pitch-black swath. No Vulture in sight, just miles of trees and giant weed sprouts. I have only a vague understanding of the planet's compass with all the cover overhead and the waning sunlight. I can't get my bearings. Marines are still yelling at one another, issuing their own orders in absence of mine. What they say is

incomprehensible to me. I scan for the Spartans and realize they've already disappeared, taking on their own course of action. I know that it's taking too much time to hunt down any reinforcements. Too much else happening. A teleport of that magnitude is already overly ambitious and I abandon the search for air support.

But now it didn't matter. The sapper team reported in.

"LT, we've got shield walls cordoning off their camp. We can't engage anything past it!"

"Roger, can you breach with firepower?"

"Already tried! Frags can't cut it. We need shaped charges."

"Do it!"

"We don't have any with us."

"Damn." I whisper only to myself.

"LT, orders?!" Haze shouts.

I hesitate for a few seconds.

"Another wave is coming!" Yells one of the scouts from somewhere else.

"Struger!" I shout. "I'm going to send you in to scout the far perimeter."

The Corporal is surprised by this order, maybe a little reticent to obey it. How could he not be? Anyone would react similarly. But it's a way to slip past the enemy defenses and he soon recognizes the risk as an opportunity.

"You have to trust me."

He nodded.

I teleport him far beyond enemy lines, well away from danger.

"Find our friendlies, Struger." I radioed as he disappeared.

A plasma grenade lands next to me. I shot up from cover and ran as fast as I could, diving into the dirt. I feel heat and a shockwave, but nothing else as I look back. The grenade detonates harmlessly, scorching only the earth.

"Shit, that was close, sir!" Someone shouted.

A scout removed from the immediate vicinity called out, "They're getting closer!"

We're all looking upward now in silence, every rifle fixed at an uncomfortably high angle, waiting for the final onslaught.

"Alright, everyone," I say into TEAMCOM, "prepare for the big one."

"The Pelicans are here!" Holmes shouted.

As everyone looked up at the flat bellies of the gunships hovering above, I smiled as their rotary canons started to spool. First, the deafening noise drowned out all thought as supersonic streams of tracers and chaos silenced our attackers. Steaming, banana-sized casings fell like rain and pelted our helmets. Then there was only stillness. Within seconds, it was all over.

"This is Angry Bird Two. All hostiles eliminated."

"Many thanks." I radioed back. "You made it just in time."

"You're lucky we did. Only reason we found you was from the heat signatures your grenades set off. We kicked up quite a bit of dust now, so watch out for stragglers out there."

"Good job. Find a place to land and we'll link up with you soon."

We rose from our cover and waved onward, began the steep ascent up the berm.

Once at the top of the rise, I could see the entirety of the shield wall had disappeared, offering an unobstructed path inward. In between the wavering pockets of smoke and dust were clear views of the carnage produced by the Pelican gunships.

"Fucking hell!" Lawrence shouted.

"Jealous you couldn't score kills?" Haze asked.

"A little bit, but really I'm just impressed."

"Everyone, stay sharp." I ordered. "Could be anything out there."

Just then, a lone Elite commando emerged from a patch of thick trees. Lima Company's reflexes were acute, but the enemy was instantly tackled by Adrian in a blur of motion. The alien commando hollered in pain as the Spartan wrapped an arm around its neck and snapped it broken with a swift, jerking movement. Before one of my aggressing squads could react to the threat, it was already dispatched by the Spartan.

Another Elite, this one gold, could be seen decloaking itself and igniting an energy blade that the creatures so often favored in CQB. They did this when they fought up close and personal or when they knew it was their time to die with one last fight. Taking its eyes off the Spartan that just killed its brethren, it then took notice of an entire company of Marines and retreated behind the gracious cover of a mature Giantwood. All of Lima poured into the thorny trunk, splinters of bark spraying in almost every direction. Some slowly flanked as they fired full-auto.

After we converted much of the base into wet pulp, the tree slowly cantilevered to the ground and crashed with a chest-rattling _thump!_

Behind a cloud of sawdust and floating leaves, the Elite emerged, sword already activated and shining bright, cutting through the haze.

With its free hand, it thumped at its chest and roared with the sound of some suicidal bravado much like Grunts on suicide runs exhibited, only this creature had far more potential—and everyone here knew that. It then charged us. But with only one enemy in our midst, it was easily engaged before coming close to a single Marine. It was felled instantly. The dying warrior produced one final gurgled roar before its eyes closed shut.

We then looked around in silence. The forest was a battered mess. Only a couple of us had been injured, no fatalities. The ringing caught between my ears was slowly quieting, and I could hear at conversational volumes again. A hard pat on the back startled me. I wheeled around to see Staff Sergeant Holmes there smiling.

"Second team got here just in time. Good planning, sir. You might not have caught them with their pants down, but at least we overwhelmed the hell out of them."

"Should'a seen the look on this one Grunt's face." Lawrence said. "I think it actually shit itself when it saw me."

"Roger." I smiled while trying to keep focus. "Corpsmen, tend to the wounded and notify the gunships we'll need medical support at the LZ. Someone try to raise our Vulture and tell them to rendezvous there as well. I'm sure we'll all feel safer under its wings. Scan for survivors."

"Sir," Struger radioed in, "I'm approaching a friendly. There's just one here."

"Roger, where are you?"

"I'm still inside the Covenant perimeter. All the way at the edge."

"Are we too late?"

"No—but you'd better get here quick."

"On the way."

I looked beyond all the mangled Covenant bodies. The Covenant camp was wide. I could barely see the wall of shields they emplaced as the barrier sections bounded outward to the far end of what looked like an egg-shaped perimeter. Motes of dust and falling leaves and sunrays raked through the treetops and obscured anything beyond a few dozen meters. I then rightly consulted the Transit, scanned out far and wide.

I stopped marching when I found what I presumed was what we were here for.

There was a single contact. I zoomed in on it.

"LT, there's booby traps everywhere. Watch your step, sir."

At that, everyone froze like statues, looking down and observing their surroundings.

"What is that?" Someone asked, pointing ahead to where our contact

was. "Is that a fire lit?"

It surely was. A thick, smoky column rose skyward well above the jungle canopy, broadcasting a presence for miles in every direction.

"Well, that's got the dumbest thing I've seen in a week."

Holmes stepped forth and peered through binoculars. "Um, yep. I think someone's cookingâ€¦something."

"Who is it?" Haze asked.

"Looks to be UNSC." Holmes replied. "They're wearing BDUs. Can't see much else, though."

I peered beyond, then peered into the Transit.

"What's going on, sir?"

"The extraction team isn'tâ€¦"

"Isn't what, sir?"

"Isn't extracting. They're just standing there."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Let's have you teleport us over there."

"No." I said. "Something's wrong."

"One of our guys is there, sir."

"Why would they just be sitting there?"

"Let's go find out."

"No, I'm going in alone."

"Have it your way, _sir._"

Suddenly, a voice from beyond shouted into the eerily serene jungle.

It was our contact. Masculine in tone, his voice echoed everywhere.

"Are ya friendlies or enemies or just phantoms?!"

I thought I then heard a sickly laugh from that direction.

"Okay, I'm going."

I accessed the Transit's display and instantly emerged a few paces off from his position.

"Phantoms it is, then." He said, sitting cross-legged on nothing but

leaves and twigs.

Next, I took notice of the smell. He was roasting some sort of animal carcass from the tip of a spear with an outstretched arm. The odor was powerful, traveling just as far as the smoke it rode on. My nostrils flared and burned. The small fire at his feet crackled and hissed and sent the smoky column up past the canopy, obscuring most of the man's features in the process.

"He wouldn't respond to me." Struger said with a shrug. "Maybe you'll have better luck, sir."

"Come to confront me about somethin'? Somethin' on yer mind?"

"We're friendlies," I answered the man, "sent here by Sigma Octanus Command to search for survivors."

No response.

"UNSCDF is here."

"Do I look frightened to ya, boy?"

I stepped around the fire and saw a man more grizzled than old Gunny Smith himself. He didn't bother to make any eye contact with me, just continued to char the meat over searing flames that were too hot to my liking as far away as I was.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" I scanned his fatigues. They were certainly standard issue. He'd sewn multicolored leaves of the world all over them, scavenged them himself, I imagined. It concealed an already capable uniform, but I could just barely make out the insignia, revealing his name and rank. "Sergeant Blunt?"

Only then did he look away from the fire, lifting his head at me, revealing a full beard two inches thick. His eyes then slowly drifted to my own uniform, then darted back to make eye contact with me. The look in his eyes was placid as the now quiet jungle. This man appeared to be quite at home.

"Sir?"

"How long have you been out here, Sergeant Blunt?"

I glanced about his personal encampment and found corpses of Covenant lying about, each of them obscured beneath piles of leaves and pebbles and earthen dirt. Some such were half butchered, even filleted.

"Is thatâ€¦tasty?"

"Nah, needs garlic."

"Are you sure it's safe to eat?"

"Would you believe me if I told you it tastes just like chicken?"

"Well, I don't want to be the guy that finds out for myself."

At that, he chuckled and went back to tending the meat.

"So, have you been surviving out here in the wild all on your own?"

"It would seem so, wouldn't it?"

"Looks like you're hoarding food. You eat what you kill. Commendable, Sergeant. But you know there was another wave back there."

"I know."

"We took care of it."

"I know. Heard ya comin' a while back during yer skirmish."

"Dangerous to be ambushing all by yourself. You're not all by yourself, are you?"

"This ain't nothin', kid."

"Nothing? You had a platoon-sized infantry ready to close in on you. Where's the rest of your outfit, Sergeant?"

"Just a bunch of Grunts and Jackals was all ya encountered." He shrugged. "Hell, they got more brain power than ten stupid idiots like you."

"How'd you fend off all the ones before?"

"Ya spout off too many questions in too short a time. Look around ya instead of movin' yer mouth, and ya might just answer yer own questions before askin'em!"

"You didn't do all this alone, c'mon. Where's your unit?"

"Ones ya just took out were just as gullible as every other wave before. Each suffers the same fate. I'll keep seein' ta that, keep doin' it until they're all gone. I took the side of nature here and nature always prevails. Now, you be gone. Disappear just like ya'ppeared. I ain't comin' back. I've already been freed."

"If you don't want to come with us, what were you planning on doing?"

"Stay here. Live off her land. And you think this is some kinda feat, me taking on Covy alone."

He chuckled.

I unlimbered the Transit and brought in all of Lima Company into the encampment. A show of force to a friendly.

"So, Sergeant, are you going to tell me where the rest of your people are?"

"Got a little magic show, I see."

"Why don't you come with us, Sergeant. Get you cleaned up, get you

some real food, and try to find the rest of your unit."

"I belong to the wild. Told ya, I took the side of nature and here I'm stayin'."

"I insist, Sergeant. This is no place to live. You're all alone andâ€"

"â€"I don't' blame ya for being so forward. Was hard for me to understand the law of the jungle at first. Been removed from it all our lives." He grinned wide, grabbing a handful of dirt. The coarse grains slid through his fingers and fell back down to the jungle floor, and I figured him a madman at this point.

The two Spartans then regrouped at the formation's edges, watching and listening in.

"I can see yer doubtful of me." He glanced at the faces of Lima Company. "Confused, maybe. But out here it gets real simple, real quick. The only law out here is law of the jungle. Kill or be killed. Tough at first and it's not for everyone. Yer lucky if ya make it this far. But once ya do, it's just so simple, that sound. Ya hear it?" He cupped a hand against his ear. "The silence. That's peace. Just you and the streams and the trees swayin' in the wind. Ya get a feel for everything. Ya blend in better once you fully break away. Once you're broken. Then after a while, ya know exactly when somethin's not quite right. Then, ya make it right. With her help."

While all of Lima Company was in spectacle of this lone survivor, the Sergeant casually pulled from a pocket a Derringer from a bygone era, a Semmerling variant of an old service pistol. He raised it slowly and pointed to the periphery with an outstretched arm. I flinched when the burst of fifty-cal shots rang out, and the lone Skirmisher stalking behind a tree trunk a mere fifteen meters away fell out of cover and onto its knees.

"That's one exception. I do get lazy sometimes."

He set the pistol down at his side as the Jackal howled and squawked for help there, grimacing at the gore pouring out of one of its lower extremities.

The raggedy Sergeant's aim was impressive. He glanced at me with a cocky smile, then to the wounded Jackal growling in pain and raw anger. The Sergeant's smile widened as he made eye contact with it. He reveled in delight at the creature's suffering, and with this behavior he was at least somewhat the same as the rest of us.

I suddenly saw in the Jackal's eyes a hope of retaliation as it reached for its own weapon. I was about to put it down, but this Sergeant fired another shot into the top of its cranium with barely a glimpse. It crashed limply to the dirt.

"Impeccable aim, Sergeant. Impressive."

"Heard ya comin' long time ago, like I said. So, who are ya and what are ya here for?"

I looked around. Most of us were raptly watching this man. Even the

corpsmen gave the occasional cursory glance while they numbed and sutured the wounded. The rest of Lima roamed around the perimeter, either scanning for booby traps or to setup lookouts in the event more Covenant loners stalked the perimeter. They couldn't help but glance upon this Sergeant between their steps.

"Careful, now, got the place rigged. Tread lightly."

"These are bullet wounds." One of the Marines says, brushing a gloved hand over the skin of a hanging corpse.

I looked outward again. Co-mingled among the slain enemy combatants hoisted high in the foliage were UNSC Marines. I then looked sidelong back to Blunt, see a pile of uniforms knotted together, dog tags and mess tins and MREs stacked in a neat pile inside a deep foxhole.

"How long have these men been strung up like this?"

"Can't be sure. Lost track of time after the first week. Make for good distractions, though, don't they?"

"You did all this?"

"Aye. Improvisation seems beyond the comprehension of these purple dipshits, at least the ones I've dealt with. Waiting for that Elite to come face me, and he'll come sooner or later after he realizes enough of his children don't report back. These dead men here been keepin' me alive, ya see."

"We got the Elite. There were two of them, actually."

Blunt pursed his lips and shrugged. "All the same to me."

"What happened here? Where's the rest of your team? Are you all that's left?"

Blunt chuckled to himself.

"This slick, young, prepped-up LT descends on this little world thinking he's gonna do right by it, questioning me. You find a tattered man all alone in the sticks, picking off Covy like he was somethin' more savage than they ever were and then you start assumin' things. I know what you're thinkin'. Thinkin' the brush and the solitude took 'im. Took his mind way out here in this off-world. Woods 'came a better friend to him 'an anyone else ever would, had 'im turn on his own kind and thought that somehow he'd have a better fightin' chance 'at way. Got tired of sufferin' others and toleratin' their misdeeds."

"Would I be wrong?"

"Yes, ya would be!"

"Well, seems to me we're getting along just fine so far despite perceptions. Why don't you keep going and tell me what happened. Exactly."

"Mutiny. Put an end to it, myself. Killed the ones responsible."

"Where's your Commander?"

"CO's out thereâ€¦I can show ya. Well, what's left of 'im." Blunt waved the barrel of the pistol around, "Murdered by these few."

"From the look of it, I can see you're a man of action. Impressive how you've dealt with the Covenant, but taking on the duties of judge, jury _and _executioner within your own unitâ€¦it's a bit overboard, Sergeant. Wouldn't you say?"

"What happened, happened. Can't change any of it."

"What would you say if I told you that sort of stuff is better left to your chain of command?"

"Didn't ya listen, boy? There's no command out here. Told ya, ones responsible saw to that. Woulda killed me too unless I pandered myself to their schemin', and that ain't my style, ya see. I didn't break. Not for them. Not for one minute. Not for anyone."

"You should've waited until you regrouped with a rescue party or some other unit."

"Take the easy way out, then, ya say. Meet up with big-Navy and play he-said-she-said. Hope someone believes your side of the story while ya watch the ones who did it git off scot-free because you don't have the proof. That your style?"

"There's no _style _in it, Sergeant. That's the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and you are not a commissioned officer. You have no authority to dole out punishment the way you did. And lookâ€¦you took it to the extreme. You'll have some answering to do for that."

"I'll make sure it don't happen next time then."

"I'm not so sure there'll be a next time for you."

"Well, what are you waitin' for? Get it over with. I was just bidin' my time until somethin' did me in."

"I'm not going to be the one that does you in, Sergeant Blunt. The only thing I'm going to do is apprehend you and take you to Reach. There, they can decide what to do with you. See how that works? _That's_ justice."

Some silence, then the mask falls as the first twinge of fear shows up in the shade of his eyes. He's distressed.

"So, you say it's Reach we're goin' to?"

"That's right. Your pistol, Sergeant, hand it over. Time to go."

* * *

><p>The trek back to the new LZ in the basin was shorter than Lima Company's insertion into the jungle, though daylight was lost. In total darkness, we marched. This world had no alternate sources of illumination, no satellites, no binary star system. A pair of Marines

had apprehended Sergeant Blunt, searched his clothing for weapons and had him pacing along in the dead center of the Company, his wrists bound behind his back. He'd declined food and water the entire way.<p>

"LT," Sergeant Haze said on approach to my place in formation, "a word, sir."

I side stepped the formation and patted the NCO on the back. "What's on your mind, Haze?"

"I couldn't say this in front of the others, but I needed to tell you something. You were reckless with the Transit back there."

"What do you mean, reckless?"

"Teleporting yourself, _alone, _into the Covenant encampment."

"Struger already had the situation under control."

"We hadn't given the all-clear yet."

"I had a pretty good feeling it was all clear after we took down two Elites back to back."

"Has your promotion to officer made you forget everything you learned as a rifleman?"

"Noâ€|"

"Well, you sure as hell acted like it, sir. You had the Transit in-hand and you left us. You just _left_. We volunteered to go with you."

"What would you have done differently, Sergeant Haze?"

"I would have waited for the fire teams to verify all hostiles down, and I certainly wouldn't have sent in an extraction team of just one person out there."

"One person was ideal for the situation. I needed stealth while the main force kept the enemies occupied."

"You accepted a ton of risk doing what you did. Struger accepted a lot of risk too."

"I had to jump someone in."

"It could've waited until they were neutralized and we gave the all-clear."

"And they were neutralized."

"Thanks to Staff Sergeant Holmes and the Pelicans, they were. And on the subject of air support, you couldn't get the Vulture's location either."

"It's easy to find flaws when that's all you're searching for. You should quit the UNSC and be a lawyer."

"I'm not joking, sir."

"Our firefight evolved by the second, Sergeant. I'm sorry everything didn't go perfectly, but all things considered it went about as well as it could have. We didn't lose anyone, Haze. That's pretty good and we were asking a lot."

"Could've been executed better, is all I'm saying."

"â€|Maybe."

"Maybe? You're being obtuse."

"I'm not sure what else you want from me. You said what you wanted to say. You had some concerns. I've listened to them. I agree the mission wasn't _perfect. _Doubtful any mission will be. So, what else?"

Haze hesitated for a moment, glancing a few directions about the dark periphery, searching for any passerbys. But the entire unit was out of earshot by now. Despite total privacy at this location, he nevertheless stepped closer to me.

"If you ever get tired of dealing with it, I could take it off your hands. Won't be a big deal for me. I've seen how it works. Not that difficult to master. But it's a burden, I know. I can see the pressure is slowly getting at you, so you just give me the word and I'll take over, take it off your hands."

"Sergeant, listen to me very carefully..."

"The Captain has designated two people, and only two people to use this thing. Lawson is dead serious about the security and survivability of the Transit. None of us need to be reminded of what Zaragosa Prime went through to attain that. And none of us need to be reminded of what people sacrificed. Lawson has made his choices. I am the operator. And I don't even know who the alternate is in case I go down. That's how serious Lawson is about the role of the Transit. I know it's not you becauseâ€"

"â€"You think I'm a worthless little shit."

"...No. What?"

"C'mon, sir, that's what you want to say."

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Then what were you going to say?"

"That I know you're not the alternate, because if you were then you wouldn't be asking to use it. You'd already know it was yours if I got neutralized in combat."

"Most of us are cool under pressure, Blake."

"And most people call me sir."

"Okay, fine, _sir."_

"Look at me, Sergeant Haze. Look at me."

Through the pitch blackness, our eyes made a forced, strained contact.

"I am your boss. It's been decided."

_ "Just know that we're capable of backing you up in any way. Even if the worst were to happen, you should know that you can lean on us for anything. So, I hope you learned from this, sir." Haze faced away and walked off, looked back once before rejoining the formation.

I stood motionless for a moment, my mind forced to replay our battle in the jungle again and again. Lima Company accrued more and more distance as I pondered it all in pitch-blackness. The trees swayed in the wind, though they could barely be seen in this darkness, and soon Lima Company was beyond my sight. There, I remained, content to relive the past, wondering about the actions I could've taken to save someone from injury or win the Marines over with perfect cunning and expertise. Actions that hadn't transpired. Actions that might never come to pass.

In my current solitude, I realized that I had to come to terms with the prospect that I might never attain gratitude or even respect. Captain Lawson stressed that expectations were high, but he was a wise man and knew that I couldn't be all things to all people. I figured that part out for myself a long time ago. What to do when commanding a company of heroes? The likes of whom were once led by Gunnery Sergeant Smith, the bravest man I'd ever known. I could only do my best. I started to move again.

I walked at a brisk pace until I rejoined the formation. Once at the tail end of the Company, I scanned the way ahead, nodding to Staff Sergeant Holmes standing at the rear point. Past shoulders and helmets and slung rifles were about two clicks of jungle and dry basin. Two more clicks and we were on our way to the _Thermisticles, _our home away from home. Minutes later, Lima Company broke through the last line of thickets and transitioned into the cracked, rocky surface. We were all exhausted as we carried on with the final march. Even with no moonlight, the Pelicans could be seen parked ahead in darkness. I deactivated the VISR and felt the end of the mission on rapid approach as we closed in on our LZ.

I then heard a faint roar from somewhere far off, sounding like an aircraft on rapid approach.

"Contact!" Shouted Adrian.

The Spartan opened fire with a rifle. Short, controlled bursts as he aimed. I couldn't make out what he was shooting at until I saw sparks flash in the distance, and I watched a Banshee close in on one of the Pelicans below it. This Banshee accelerated as it came to within striking distance of its intended target and I could clearly see it now, its canards glowing that distinct purple haze. In its high-speed strafe, a salvo of plasma rained downward and raked over the dropship's mid-section, peppering its dorsal surfaces. Before anyone else could target the enemy aircraft, it rapidly changed direction and retreated at maximum thrust to wherever it originated from. A

hit-and-run. Worse, a recon sortie that would have it reporting back to its base of operations in no time. It was then that I heard our Vulture power up far away. A subtle cheer resounded from the Marines as it ascended.

It took on an intercept vector toward the Banshee once airborne, closed in on the unsuspecting pilot. Inside a massive dust plume, it launched a hail of tracking missiles and within seconds the Covenant craft was vaporized. Now, a loud cheer erupted from Lima Company. But our revelry wouldn't last. From further beyond the same mesa our Vulture had been perched upon these long hours, a Covenant frigate emerged. Its purple hull barely contrasted against the dark of night, only truly visible by way of its engines fully aglow aft of it. The Company grew silent in an instant.

"Radio a warning to the pilot." I ordered Holmes.

"Warbird, this is Lima Company, get out of there!" Holmes shouted into a microphone. "Bogie at your back!"

No reply as the frigate sent a volley of pulse laser shots toward the Vulture at near point blank range, clipping one of its ailerons instantly. Now in pieces, our gunship lurched forward and listed to one side. The impact sent it on a collision course with another nearby curtain of solid rock on the other side of the valley, its momentum now too great to recover from.

"Shit." Holmes said.

All we could do was watch, but the Spartans were ahead of the action as always.

"Move!" Amy hollered. "We're next!"

As one, Lima Company sprinted toward our dropships waiting on the other end of the sink.

"Move!" She yelled again. "We've got to get airborne or we're done!"

Adrian grabbed hold of a wounded Marine and hoisted him in a fireman's carry, sprinting past the Company. He moved faster than any human could, soon spanning the gap Amy had on the rest of us. The remaining Marines ran as hard as they could in their wake. By the time a kilometer of running full tilt elapsed, all of us were gasping for breath as we regrouped on the Pelicans. The engines were already fully spooled by the time we filed inward by the twos. Each pilot completely disregarded pre-flight procedures and we were almost immediately airborne as we all strapped into our harnesses, then when we heard the impact far away.

"Vulture down. No eject." The Pilot reported. "Time to boogie on outta here."

"You'd better put the fire on it." Said the co-pilot. "Frigate's coming this way."

"LT, do something!" Haze cried.

I couldn't see anything out the cockpit windows as I craned my neck

out into the aisle. I unlimbered the Transit. I couldn't know if it possessed the energy required to relocate our impending threat. A Covenant frigate was massive. I knew a Pelican could outrun a Covenant frigate in atmosphere, but it couldn't outrun its armaments. Our time was running out. Haze was right. Something had to be done if we were to escape.

I could hear alarms blaring from the cockpit ahead.

The pilot screamed, "Dropping chaff!"

The aircraft lanced to one side and the hull around us groaned.

"We won't be dodging another one of those!" The co-pilot responded.

I peered into the Transit and zeroed in on the enemy frigate. At present, our formation of Pelicans was just outside of its range to accurately land pulse laser strikes, and we were already accelerating at full throttle. But I could see its lateral lines start to glow a bright red, so bright that the glare in the Transit's display was painful to look at. Covenant plasma turrets were waking along its hull. From everything I knew of Covenant fleet technology, those salvos had the ability to track their targets and surely our Pelicans could not outpace them. It occurred to me that only more distance would be our saving grace. Extreme distance. Rather than contemplate ways to distract or inflict damage on the enemy frigate, I instead took a hold of all Pelicans and prepared to send each of them to the highest possible altitudes the Transit was capable of sending them.

"Whoa!" The pilot said. "Okay, nice."

"Sit-rep?" I asked.

"We'll be onboard the _Thermisticles _in five minutes or less. Nice work, LT. Should be smooth sailing from here on out."

I stowed the Transit in its bag again and slumped back in my seat. "Do me a favor and radio in to the Captain. Inform him we're inbound-imminent and there's a frigate down there. Advise we break orbit and proceed to the next mission."

"Aye, sir."

I glanced about the cabin. Pitch blackness was all that could be seen from beyond the cockpit windscreen. Most of the troops then leaned back in their seats and cinched down their restraints as zero gee became apparent. I looked across the aisle to where Corporal Struger sat. He gave me an appreciative nod, some might say a consoling nod.

"Lima Company survives again."

20. The All-Seeing Eye

****The All-Seeing Eye****

Everyone was formed up in single file.

Hungry and weary, Lima Company awaited its due respite, occupying the entire length of the corridor just outside the ship's armory. Troops shuffled forward one at a time to turn in their weapons and gear post-deployment.

Sigma Octanus Two was a knee-jerk op, likely the fastest and shortest mission anyone among us had participated in. Most leaned up against a bulkhead in the sluggish advance. Others found the will to field strip their weapons out of courtesy, saving the armory personnel some time in disassembly and cleaning. Some did nothing but stand and wait. I knew what some of them were thinking by now in the unit's new direction as the drone of voices steadily grew. Those that discussed our incursions to the few that stayed behind in orbit did so tiredly as if it were a chore to recount the tale. As the last Marine crossed the threshold from the launch bay sealed further behind, we took our place in line and I scanned the hall. Spartans were somewhere else, as usual. They weren't seen since the dismount. The Pelican formation now parked and awaiting maintenance was an afterthought. Debriefing from crew chiefs on armaments and readiness for the next mission would soon be on the agenda. Senior personnel had reporting requirements and wouldn't get much rest. Captain Lawson rarely took pause despite this optempo.

No sooner had I eased my stance, Captain Lawson's voice boomed through the sector's PA.

"Lieutenant Pennington, when you're through there, proceed directly to the Command Deck."

"Aye, sir."

I was the last one in line.

I looked ahead and decided to get comfortable knowing the long wait was in store.

The CQ called out from somewhere ahead. "Sir, we'll take you now."

I stepped out of line and paced to the front.

"Of course he's first." A voice nearby mumbled.

I was too tired to respond at the jab knowing there were looming priorities jabbing even harder.

The large dolly at the head of the line was already laden with sooty rifles, pistols and shotguns. I offloaded all my weapons and outer ensemble as I walked, nodding my thanks to the lone Corporal manning the armory. Before exiting, I gave Lima Company a cursory glance before setting off to the _Thermisticles' _Bridge.

* * *

><p>The walk was long and barren of people and I enjoyed solitude for the time, slowing my pace. The healing planet we'd only briefly set out to before was still poised beyond the bow, the Captain deep in thought as I entered. Rosetta customarily announced my presence, but the Captain's stance was still directed toward that world.<p>

After a moment, he said, "We're losing a Spartan."

He still looked beyond, choosing not to establish eye contact with his only lieutenant for some reason. Maybe out of reticence to see my reaction to the news, puzzled at how such an established field officer with a lot of momentum behind him could lose such an asset in such short order. I gaited closer and assumed Parade Rest, awaiting orders. It was then that I saw the lone Pelican shuttling away from the _Thermisticles_ and toward Sigma Octanus IV. He was tracking it since its departure, I gathered. News of losing a Spartan could never be good, no matter how anyone worded it. His statement was direct and to the point as usual, and I hesitated to inquire exactly who we were losing.

"Not Amy." He added.

"Why are we to lose Adrian, sir?"

"Apparently, ONI thinks one Spartan is enough for Lima Company. For now, anyways. Could get worse as I was actually due to lose both of them until three other Captains and a General finally convinced them that yanking Oh-Seven-One from the project would not be in good practice."

"You had Amy in Lima Company from the beginning."

"Still might lose her. Remains to be seen. The mission at Zaragosa Prime is long behind us and I've been lucky to keep her as long as I have, so now I'm under evaluation. If ONI can be convinced I'm using the Spartan to the fullest extent, not wasting her skillset, we can hold onto her."

"Think that'll happen?"

Lawson spun about to face me. "No."

"So we're going to lose her?"

"Well, maybe not. It's all about timing now. We've only got two more stops to make before we're at Reach, and I'm hoping that by the time ONI makes their decision we'll have already entered the critical phase and be essentially off-limits to the likes of a single command. If we get the final greenlight, we'll be a truly joint operation and ONI will be just one player on a larger team."

"And if we don't get the greenlight by then, Amy's gone."

"But I've got reason for optimism. Received a lot of chatter since we left that briefing. Steps are being taken to form the joint task force right _now_. It's going to gain momentum. They've already stood up separate personnel and intel commands dedicated to the plan. Logistics supply chains are in the works. So far, a core group of _very_ important people are sold on the Transit and the strike mission. And guess where Lima Company will be when it reaches critical mass?"

"Tip of the spear."

"Just like I promised."

"Fingers crossed, sir."

"I had hoped to have a Spartan dedicated to offense and one to defense before an ONI admiral sent me that kind of correspondence, but now we'll just have to make due with one bodyguard for the time being."

Lawson nodded at me. I could see the hope and anticipation welling, that something tremendous he and many other strategists had worked for was slowly but surely piecing together. Something that could alter the course of this long, costly war. It was incredibly ambitious. Everyone knew that. Obviously risky, but nevertheless achievable and now within reach. The payout could be monumental: the once-insuperable Covenant could be struck down.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, you were about to brief me right before I ran you over with all that."

"No, sir. I'm glad you didâ€¦"

I glanced out the viewport once more at the departing Pelican only to notice the much larger vessel passing it by. Then it was gone. A stealth ship.

I squinted outward, just barely witnessing those outlines again. Even starside, I wouldn't have seen it if not for the contrast against the bright, reflective planet to her port.

"â€¦Is that a Prowler?"

The Captain glanced over his shoulder. "Yes. Winter-class designed for quick infiltrations."

"Looks like it's about to infiltrate the _Thermisticles. _It's headed straight for us."

"It'll be docking with us soon_. _Next mission will require it. I'll brief you on it when we're en route to the next star system." The Captain nodded. "So, please. Your turn."

"Well, it was hard to get answers out of the one we rescued. There could be more friendlies down there at Sig-Oh-Two. Should we reconsider? Or at least recommend Mattis re-deploy a recon force there and resume scanning? Maybe Colonel Mattis could create a small task force, have some superiority in case that frigate shows up again."

Lawson thought about this for a few seconds, the longest time yet that I'd seen him contemplate on any matter.

"â€¦No." He said flatly. "He's not in that position yet. And neither are we. Our mission takes precedence. Any other day, I'd gladly stick around and lend support. Our ship is capable against a single frigate, but I think I'll count my blessings and avoid that confrontation. It's a shame we lost the _Boxer, _but I doubt anyone's going to task out any of their own ships as combat escort. Not to a known hostile area. Not while they're recovering. Operation Island Hop's timetable alone negates any possibility of it. I sent out a warning communique to Sigma Octanus Four about the frigate you encountered. Hopefully they can muster enough firepower to take it

out when they're back to full strength. Take solace, Lieutenant. We've done a good deed here. Mattis will appreciate that. We have to be moving on now. So, moving on, I skimmed over your latest after actions reports. You and I will be going over it in detail later, but first go ahead and get yourself cleaned up and fed and take care of your people."

"Will do."

I turned to exit the Bridge.

"Pennington," the Captain called out.

I stopped and about-faced. "Yes, sir?"

"I knew Lima Company would prevail."

* * *

><p>"How's it going, LT?" Gunny Rios said as he glanced up at me.<p>

"Making a pit stop for some fuel."

I sat down and didn't waste a minute to eat.

"How'd it go with the Captain?"

"Same as always. Got new orders, so I'm busy again. Got any fires you're putting out in the Company, Gunny?"

"Had a troop just lost their homeworld to Covvie. She's taking it wellâ€|for now."

"I can only imagine. To be too far away to do anything. She have family there?"

"â€|She did."

Silence for a moment.

"Other than that, sir, it's going smoothly. So what's got you busy?"

"Well, when I'm not overseeing mission prep, my CNI feeds me volumes of UNSC basic officer training non-stop."

Gunny took a swig of juice, nodded. "Gotta play catch up."

Then the whole mess took pause when Sergeant Blunt entered.

Nearly every person in the room stopped doing what they were doing and saw a man with incredible presence walking down the perimeter, his face impassive, surveying us just as we did him. Two sergeants flanked him, escorted him to a private table where they sat him down and unshackled his wrists.

"Food fight?" Lawrence said from a nearby table.

"Look at his handlers." Rios whispered. "They don't want to be within

ten meters of the guy. Have any of you been up close to him?"

"I try not to be." Struger replied. "Looks like he could kill covvie and human."

"I can say from first hand experience, he reeks. Doesn't take showers. Handlers heard him say he only drinks and bathes with natural water. Whatever that means."

"No detergents, I guess."

"I guess the ship's purifiers aren't up to his standards either."

"He'll have to drink some of it sooner or later."

We all watched him and he sensed our collective gaze in an instant.

Then Haze entered the mess, making his way down the line, inevitably nearing Blunt's table on the way to ours. The confined Sergeant immediately hunched over a plate of food the guards fetched him in a protective display just like feral animals would. He eyed his passerby with scorn and Haze squinted in confusion.

"Look at that." Gunny shook his head. "He's as wild as those Jackals we put down."

"But remember," Holmes said, "he's as capable as any of us. Who knows how many Covenant he took down all by himself. He could be useful. He'd just need time to repatriate."

"He's no good to us, though. Sir, if it were my choice, I'd hire a man with half his skill and none of his baggage. He's not fit for this unit or this mission. What are we gonna do with him ultimately?"

"Yeah," Holmes added, "what do you think the Captain would say about all this?"

"I don't know," I replied, "but it's ultimately his decision what happens to the guy. I just call it like I see it. And I see two outcomes for Blunt. One was dying in that jungle. The other is facing what's coming to him. Well, whenever someone finds out what really happened anyway. Since he's along for the ride, I guess he gets to cheat judgment one more time until we're allowed to offload him. Maybe Reach will be his ultimate destination."

Haze glanced back at Blunt before nearing our table, then stopped mid-stride as he and I made eye contact.

"Looks like you have a full table. I'll eat somewhere else."

"You can have my seat." Holmes offered. "I'm done."

"No, it's okay. Take your time. Plenty of other places."

Rios sat straighter and again shook his head. "You know that the Captain is going to want a full debrief on this guy, Blunt, after he sees our AARs. And if he catches our combat video logs, he's

definitely going to want some resolution. Captain Lawson won't let it go."

"I think you're right."

"I know I'm right."

"It'd look better on us if we start now before the Captain has to tell us to."

"Yeah, but how? This guy is a clam stuck shut. Ain't opening for nobody."

"If he hasn't reached out to anyone by now, it would seem he never will. Which also means he'll likely distort the facts to stall if he ever does respond to questioning."

"Yeah, but only he has the facts. There's no one else."

"If we're going to extract any info from him, we need to do it smartly. We need to have a method in place that gives us some idea of whether we're getting the truth or not. Or at least enough information to make recommendations to the Captain."

"Any suggestions, sir?"

"Let's wait for him to come down from his shock. He's no good to anybody the way we found him. Too defensive."

"How long do you want to wait, sir?"

"Not sure, but we've got plenty of time. Don't give the impression we're hard pressed on time. He'll be suspicious that way."

"That's a long time for him to be waiting in confinement. Sure he won't resent us for that?"

"He won't have to because I'm cutting him loose. He's free to wander about the ship."

"And that's a good idea too?"

"He needs to feel freedom again. He needs to feel he's among allies, not captors."

"Yeah, about that, sir. You did say to him that he's gonna get what's coming to him."

"That's only if he's guilty of something. Otherwise, he should feel his story can be heard by fair and impartial people like you and me."

"And on the other hand, what's in it for him to come clean and spill the beans on what happened out there if he knows he'll eventually wind up confined at Reach?"

"Nothing, at least in dealing with me. So, I'll need you all to do it. I have to be out of the picture on this one and you have to become his peers. And eventually his confidants."

Gunny shrugged with a bitter smile, and a welling humor I'd see in his predecessor before began to show. "I never thought I'd be playing good-cop-bad-cop in the Corps, sir. And inside of a giant can too. This'll be a first for me."

"All of us. Just another loose end to tie up before Lima Company lives up to its true purpose."

At that, the mess table fell silent for a moment.

I resumed. "He doesn't seem to care much for officers anyways. You are the senior ranking enlisted, so ideally it's you. You can bring along anyone else too. He'll feel like he's among allies that way."

"Man, I wish Gunny Smith was here."

"That makes two of us. Well, you'd better keep an eye on the good Sergeant and be ready to welcome him back to reality if we hope to turn that page. Cut him loose. Let him get a hot shower whenever he warms up to it and give him free reign at the mess for even hotter meals. He'll feel like a new man once he's had both, and eventually he'll let his guard down."

* * *

><p>Leaving the mess, the CNI automatically unsilenced its messaging notification service and sounded a chirp to get my attention. I opened up a data tab and immediately acknowledged a message from Captain Lawson.<p>

FULL ACCOUNTING OF PRIOR MISSION DUE. MEET IN THE OFFICER'S CONFERENCE HALL.

"Sergeant Haze has really been on your case, LT."

I spun about, saw Holmes and shrugged.

"Haze has some legitimate concerns about our mission."

"That's either you covering for him or you've got a talent for understatement. You're a good Marine, sir, but a terrible liar."

I could only shrug in response, Holmes always being the Marine to read me like an open book.

"Sir, Haze has got more concerns than just the mission. While you're busy, more and more Marines are starting to take notice of him and all the smart-ass remarks."

"Just Haze's way."

"I know Haze and his ways. This is more than just personality quirks. This is a trend. He got quite vocal on the ride outta Sigma Octanus Two. He pulls these kind of antics when you're not around."

"You rode up with him?"

"I was right next to him."

"What kind of stuff was he saying? Was it about me?"

"â€|Mostly."

"Any details?"

"I can't remember it verbatim, but don't worry, sir. We talked him down. Didn't take long, either. Once we were safe and celebrating, he eventually went silent."

"Maybe he's a bit restless since leaving Zagosa. More so than most of us."

"How are you holding up, sir?"

"Not sure about that yet. I'm busy dealing with the Captain. He wants the full, compiled AAR from Sigma Octanus Two like ten minutes ago."

"Don't forget to rest up, sir. You can't be everywhere at once."

"Starting to realize that. So, do me a favor and keep an eye on Sergeant Haze for me."

"I've been keeping an eye on him ever since we lost Gunny Smith."

"Captain knew what he was doing making you an NCO."

* * *

><p>No sooner had I rounded the entryway to the conference room, Captain Lawson immediately jabbed a finger on the surface of the conference table, saying, "You need to squash this, Lieutenant. This breach of protocol occurring among your people. Sergeant Haze walked into the bridge unannounced and started talking to me about leadership in Lima Company andâ€|I can't remember half the things he was saying because he was blathering on and on, without any coherency at all. Reign that man in."<p>

"Aye, sir."

"Sit down and upload your report to the console."

"Aye, sir."

Together, we watched my v-log of the entire mission at Sigma Octanus Two.

I'd offhandedly see Captain Lawson nod or grunt with approval, occasionally swiping at the screen to queue up another's v-log and gain multiple perspectives of the incursion. A smile appeared when he saw the camera pan purely vertical to witness the sight of gunships abruptly ending the firefight in the hilly jungle. Eventually, we came to the part where Haze issued his own critique during the return journey.

I hope you learn from this, sir.

Lawson let the video roll on. The look on his face was now anything but approving, or even reserved in his current disapproval. I glanced back on the video screen. There I was, alone in the woods, the troop formation steadily gaining distance as I lingered in darkness beneath the canopy.

He paused the video and there on that still frame he gathered his thoughts for a moment.

"Half a minute alone. You let the Sergeant get to you. Took you a while to catch back up to Lima Company. Is your thinking flawed?"

"Haze has always been a temperamental."

"And have you thought about what to do with Haze since this happened?"

"He's harmless."

"Jumping the chain of command and conferring directly with you on combat tactics is not what any officer would call harmless. If he had concerns with leadership, protocol, and common courtesy for that matter, the proper course of action is to make those concerns known with senior enlisted beforehand. We all know this. Why is he special?"

"I think since we both came up in the ranks together, he feels he's got a direct line to me."

"Well, this is out of line. And your open door policy is going to leave you susceptible to more instances like this. And did I hear him offer to take the Transit?"

"Yes, sir. Correct. He offered to take it off my hands."

"That is asinine."

"I can tolerate episodes like this. I'm going to give him a pass."

"Are you sure that's best for the unit?"

"Well, speaking of which, he at least went out of his way to confront me alone and not contradict me in front of others. What they don't know won't hurt them."

"And that's commendable of the Sergeant?"

"We have history, sir."

"I know you do." Lawson nodded. "You've been through a lot together. Now, it's different. You both have your place in this unit, and that's him beneath you. What if he questions you again? What if he questions you in front of others? Or during a firefight? Are you thinking about that?"

"I'll shut it down next time it happens, but I won't reprimand him today, sir. That's my determination."

"Your call. You'd be wise to expand your observation of him regardless. Help you see what's coming if you're wrong about him."

"That, I can do."

"And don't for a minute think he's right about anything he said of you. He's coming from a very weakened state. I'm sure if we had a resident psychologist, they would agree."

"Why's that?"

"He lost an older brother, his only brother. Ashton Haze was a fine soldier. During the initial battle of Jericho, his unit got separated and was pinned down by an entire Covenant battalion. There weren't even any bodies to recover before they issued the evac hours later. It made Ryan eventually join the UNSC when he came of fighting age. Prior to that, he'd landed himself in a lot of trouble as a minor. Barely made it past the recruiter's screening. But once he was in, he excelled above all others in training, particularly in combatives, thus his assignment to Lima Company." Lawson glanced back to the v-log. "But this attitude since you took the lead concerns me. It should concern you."

"I thought you selected everyone that's in Lima Company, sir. You didn't see any of this coming? These personality traits?"

"Yes, I did to some extent. Lima Company is experimental after all. Bringing Haze into that fold was a calculated risk. And he did fine at Zaragosa, but that was with Gunnery Sergeant Smith in charge. Maybe he looked up to him, just like a younger brother would. I don't know. Smith was very informal and his charisma worked well for the unit. But now, things are different and things will continue to change as we reshape Lima Company into the unit I intended it to be. Haze has surely changed as well, though I'm not so sure it's for the better."

"Maybe he resents your selection process."

"Whether or not that's the case, he will respect your authority. I'm not going to tell you how to run your own company, Lieutenant. That's your job now. I'll say no more on this. I will say that after seeing the mission unfold myself, it was a success. Good use of people and resources, cool under pressure, you listened to your Spartans and made excellent tactical decisions, and there were only minor injuries as a result of all this. Lima Company prevailed."

"We lost a pilot. A Vulture pilot, no less."

"I know, but don't dwell. Remember, loss is just another part of command."

"Hard to look past it so easily. I keep thinking maybe there was something that could've been done to prevent it."

"With the kind of radio interference you experienced down there? Even if you had established contact and warned the pilot in time, that frigate still would've made a showing and nothing would have changed. You can't control everything, Pennington. Learn to deal with that."

And you will. I know you will. You'll come into your own as we move forward."

"I wonder how the Colonel feels about it."

"Actually, I do know how he feels about it. He's lending us another Vulture."

"He is?"

"Among other things, yes. Apparently they have a lot of things up for grabs in some dusty depot down there."

"He must really believe in the strike mission."

"Hope that we get this lucky going forward. You don't see those kinds of favors too often. Now, moving on to the one we rescued. Sergeant Blunt."

"Yeah, about that, sir. I am open to suggestions about what to do with him. He's got nearly the entire company spooked. They're pretty fidgety around him."

"Never mind that. Has he been properly debriefed, Lieutenant?"

"Not yet. I do have a plan of action going, but Sergeant Blunt requires finesse. He's been through a lot."

"Assessment?"

"Quiet. More like a man of action than talkative. Bit of a badass. Comes across as a low-key Gunny Smith, if that makes sense. But with the kind of stress he endured down there and the things we saw, we might never learn what his situation was. And for any number of reasons, he might never come out of his shell by the time we enter the final phase."

"I'd like to have this resolved before then, Pennington. It's our duty to do so. I can't even begin to think what Big Navy would think of us if we hand him over without a proper accounting of his mission—and how it turned so damned mutinous."

"I understand, Captain, but I can't promise anything. All we can do is try."

"I am requesting a daily status on this. Alright, I believe that concludes this debrief. Anything else?"

"No, not at this time, sir."

"There are undoubtedly some lessons to be learned here, but now we can move on. I can fully trust you with command."

"Does it get easier, sir?"

"What, losing people?"

"Yeah."

"No. It doesn't get any easier. You just get more used to it."

* * *

><p>"Going somewhere?"<p>

"Hey, Holmes, walk with me."

"You're walking that busy walk, sir."

"Too fast for you?"

"At present, yes. I was hoping to take a load off my mind. Where you headed?"

"Reactor room."

"Oh, that means you're about to pump energy into that ball o'magic. Which means we're due to deploy real soon. What'd the Captain tell you?"

"You'll have all questions answered soon. I feel kind of stupid asking you this question, but has Sergeant Haze said anything that caught your attention recently?"

"Yes, depending on who's asking."

"Just me. So, what have you got for me?"

"He's having trouble sleeping."

"Great. I'm up to my ears in real issues while Gunny's babysitting Sergeant Blunt and you're babysitting Sergeant Haze."

"Well, Gunny and Amy actually got through to Blunt. They wanted me to give you this recording. I'll upload it to your CNI in a minute. And don't worry about Haze. It's not a big deal for me. I have this under control. Remember, I've known him a lot longer than you have."

"So, he brought this sleep deficiency to your attention or have you been keeping tabs on him better than I thought you would?"

The reactor room hatchway parted down the center and slid apart, revealing support trusses, high-pressure cooling conduits and radiation waveguides, the innards of the ship's powerplant. Beyond the first catwalk was the sapphire glow emanating from beyond the bulwark of airtight seals, cordoning off the dense neutron storm on the other side.

"A bit of both. Says he can't get more than a couple hours' shuteye a day."

"A couple hours a day? That's not good. I think it's time he gets medically evaluated. I'm axing him from this next mission, and as soon as we get to Reach I want you to see that he's properly taken care of by doctors."

"I'll see it done, sir."

"Oh, and no synthetics for him. None."

I unlimbered the Transit and stared at the black sphere for a moment. I hadn't known why I was staring until the sight of a new object on its surface emerged, barely noticeable. Only with the light of this sector could it have been visible if it was ever present times before.

It was an inconspicuous, tiny dot. A deep, dark purple. So dark that it was only slightly off-black against the black surface, as if once part of the surrounding void but somehow escaped its abyss.

Or was cast out.

It then began to pulsate in brightness, slowly, rhythmically.

An instant later, it became ringed in bright yellow, adding even more clarity to its existence.

"What's up, sir?"

"Nothingâ€|" I said, reaching forward and thrusting the Transit into a receptacle. It sealed shut and I watched as the gantry way retracted and spun about the circumference of the room, leading the sphere to its eventual destination inside a gamma ray bath.

"â€|Probably nothing."

* * *

><p>A message notification chimed, the CNI having completed its download of the video Holmes sent me. I stopped walking, passerbys guiding around me.<p>

"Spartan Oh-Seven-One and I wanted to stop by to see how you were doing, if there's anything we can help you with. Maybe you want to talk about things back at Sigma Octanus Two, anything."

"Well, you need a Spartan to make sure I'm behavin'. I'm flattered."

"Oh, her? She's just here because she was curious about your health."

"Uh-huh."

"So, anything you want to talk about?"

"I know why the three of us are here, so let's get past the child's play. We're here because ya want my story."

The Spartan remained silent and the Gunny nodded agreeably.

"We were stranded on that world. No reachback. No way out. Men change when that happens."

"Things took a turn for the worse." The Gunny said.

"Men lost faith. Gave into fear. Fear became their guiding light."

"Your unit splintered."

Blunt then drew a deep breath, recounting.

"Certain types have an inner mutiny. Predisposed. The worst are the ones who can influence those around them, the whisperers. Capture your fear and shape it. Build it slow and silent. And when the betrayal finally happens, it happens when ya least expect it. Ya can't see it until it's too late, that lusty hunger they got in their eyes. And ya kick yerself because ya realize ya seen it all along."

"That's what happened with your unit?"

"What do ya think?"

"I think I want to keep listening."

Blunt cocked his head to the side, the puffed, mangy beard obscuring most of his features. But the striking eyes full of story were overpowering. For a moment, he studied the Gunny and the Spartan, the look in his gaze resolute.

"Any idiot put together can see this is a different kind of unit. Yer all bound by oaths ya took and yer duty, and ya got that portable superweapon yer LT's carryin' around. Ya got a purpose. Well, I've done my duty, and now I've got one last deed to carry out. That deed is a warning. Certain types of people come across a time and a place where duty ends. I don't know when it'll happen, but I promise, it's comin' for ya."

"You suspect someone?"

Blunt shrugged.

"Who?"

"They prolly used to be tight with ya, but over time they avoid yer company. Same exact thing happened with my unit, only my CO was two ranks higher and actually had some experience. But now yer stakes are much higher with that superweapon. Someone's gonna make a pass at it, sooner or later."

The Gunny glanced back at Amy, and she shook her head.

"You know," the Gunny began, "I've heard of men becoming the very thing they hated and tried to destroy."

Blunt was unfazed by the Gunny's ruse.

"Whatever hate I had, whatever hate you _think _I have, it's been used up on that world and buried there. Along with those men."

The disconnected, sterile video playback that followed was of the Gunnery Sergeant and the Spartan exiting the room after a silent moment, leaving Blunt to himself.

But the audio continued as the two paced away from Blunt's quarters.

"You believe him, Rios?"

The Gunny thought hard on that for a moment.

"You knowâ€|apart from all the blabberâ€|I do. He never once moved, Amy. Never blinked, never lost eye contact, never scratched his face or wiped his nose. The guy was firm. No guilt. I think he was telling the truth."

"Or he has no tells."

"Either way, we only have his version of the story like I said before."

"That's just it. We haven't heard the story yet. I'm not convinced."

"What do you think we should do?"

"LT's call, but I say just keep talking with him at every opportunity you get. Maybe get others to visit him. See if the story changes."

* * *

><p>"We're en route to Troy, Hellespont System." Captain Lawson said as I stood nearby at parade rest. "Sixteen hours until deployment."<p>

The bow screen offered no view outside the hull, though I knew exactly what was beyond: nothing. The _Thermisticles _and all her hands had resumed Operation Island Hop, the jaunt through the void of slipspace, now another week's journey to the next world since the departure from the Sigma Octanus system.

"FLEETCOM confirms the planet was glassed this May," he added, "so I've been told to expect a residual enemy force on patrol."

"What's the mission this time?"

"This is a snatch and grab for a VIP that never made the evacuation, a Rear Admiral Serin Osman. You'll have her details uploaded to your lace. The _Thermisticles _will maintain a holding pattern beyond Covenant detection range. From there, the prowler _Blink Once _will be your transport vector to low orbit, close enough to get you within range of teleporting directly to the target, a subterranean bunker we hope is still intact and secure.

"It's August now. They're sure she's still around after four months down there?"

"It's a UNSC fallout shelter like Omega Wing, designed for situations like these. It can provide twelve months of security, shelter, sanitization and sustenance for a group the size of Lima Company."

"She can operate and maintain it by herself, though?"

"Admirals are never alone."

"So was this mission requested of you as a top priority?"

"Yes, but not because she'll run out of food, Lieutenant. The knowledge she may hold is crucial to the UNSC and we're going to rescue her."

"What are your assessments, sir? Can we pull this off?"

"Rosetta confirms my analysis at ninety-percent certainty that we can extricate her with zero loss. We have exact coordinates and depth, and I've been told she sent out a slipspace probe two months ago outlining the current Covenant presence in-system and on the ground using satellite imagery."

"Not exactly fresh intel."

"Agreed, but this tells us she's alive and kicking and Rosetta also guarantees all calculations made will give the Transit enough capacity to get you all there and back again without depleting its supply, all while bypassing any enemy activity. Of course you will be a lightweight force due to constraints dictated by the Transit, but you will nonetheless be a fireteam comprising elite members of your selection, and the Spartan will be going with you. Let's just hope all you encounter down there is a bored admiral. Is the Transit ready?"

"I think so."

"What do you mean, you think so? Is it ready?"

"...Yes. It's ready."

* * *

><p>I knew the Thermisticles entered real space once her blast shields retracted over the bow screen. Bright starlight filled the bridge. Somewhere, very far ahead was our destination. Another colony world.

Captain Lawson turned to face me. "It's time."

"Aye, sir."

I exited the bridge and proceeded to the launch bay.

There, the team had been waiting and prepping. The sharp, angular lines of the _Blink Once _were menacing and looked extremely odd inside the bay, like the vessel didn't belong here. We all entered her cargo bay single file as I approached, no words spoken. I took the nav station for the view while an iso-Rosetta guided the ship automatically along its course, which presently jettisoned the _Blink Once _out of the _Thermisticles_ and into the night.

Even at sixty-percent thrust, the journey to the planet wouldn't be long. We were already inside the planet's umbra, fully shadowed from the system's star. Occasional, minuscule twinkles of light caught my eye from random spots on this dark side of the planet, the tell-tale signs of the glass sheet that now encased much of its vast surface.

After two hour's journey, we were within range to teleport directly

into the chamber.

The team had already started final preparation further aft in the ship. Within minutes, we gathered in the cargo hold with weapons, armor, and all the courage we could muster before heading into this new unknown.

We were inside. It was a small, well-lit, ten by ten meter room with lockers and shelves and refrigerators and stowed Murphy beds lining the walls. It was a mess. It looked like a bomb went off inside. We found out exactly why as the only entryway had been blasted away, a once-solid Titanium vault door just in pieces and strewn about the interior in razor-sharp scraps. Outside was a scene not unlike the mines of the Foreclay Outpost, rocky and dark. Looking around, a single sanitization facility was in the corner, cordoned off from the room with a door "currently open."

"Look at that." Struger pointed. "Solid Titanium-A a meter thick and they just cut right through it. Blew it right to smithereens." He picked up a scrap piece of it and flinged it across the room with a flick of the wrist. "Yeah, they came in, got her, killed everyone else, hauled 'em all away, in and out in a few seconds. Very clean. Got her alive because they knew she was important."

"How can you be so certain?" I asked.

"Do you know what the forming temperature of Titanium-A is? You'd have to be shooting some _very _serious firepower to get that to break open. And they did it in such a way that it didn't jeopardize their target."

"Osman." Amy said.

"They knew exactly what they were doing and how to do it. I wonder how much time they had inside before the Covvie broke through."

I nodded absentmindedly while glancing around. The bunker still had plenty of illumination from some unseen power source and an air current was felt through overhead ducting, but there was no admiral present. It didn't appear anyone had been present for some time, except for "I

"Smells like piss." I said as the draft hit me squarely in the face.

"And shit." Lawrence added.

"Fresh, too." Struger said, his nostrils flared.

Amy glanced around. "Check the bathroom. Could be just a clog."

"No, I'm here."

The neural lace began displaying a message.

Don't _look up, whatever you do. And do not alert your team to my presence."

I did as the sender asked. I scrutinized the message header, finding their identity. It was her, the Admiral.

Now, don't make any sudden movements after what I'm about to tell you. They're coming in the door right now if they're not here already, but you won't see them. It's a team of specialized Elites with advanced camouflage systems. They're after me, not you. They would've killed you by now. They're waiting for you to find me and then they'll finish the job. For now, I need you to tell your team to do something usefulâ€”they will know something is off if they see you doing nothing. Think of something.

"Alright, everyone, hydrate and search the lockers and shelves for any clues. Careful not to break anything, so move about very slowly. We need to find clues so we can find her."

Good. Walk to a corner of the room farthest from the entrance and open a channel with your Spartan. Tell the Spartan I am here and that Elites are in the area, but not to engage. Order your Spartan only to scan the area with thermals. It's the only way to spot them. Do it now.

I moseyed to the place where she mentioned, taking cursory glances at the team and at the items in the room, exuding nothing readily suspicious in my actions. Stopping exactly in the corner, feigning an inspection of a wall locker, I then initiated contact.

I whispered, "Amy, don't react and don't engage. Hostiles in the room. Camo'd Elites, number unknown. They're here for the VIP who is somewhere close by. We're not dead so I'm guessing it'll stay that way until they know we've spotted them. Pan around the room with thermal vision. I'll do the same with my HUD. Repeatâ€”do not engage. You look first."

I remained in my spot with eyes toward the wall, feigning another inspection.

A green-colored blip shone in my HUD.

"Roger." She said. "Four Elites. Two posted up at the exit with repeaters, one at the wall right behind me with a sword, and the last is right on top of Holmes with a sword. The shooters have you pretty well covered, sir. Only one not hosed is Gunny. They're awaiting orders. My guess is the one breathing down my neck is the ring leader."

I then turned to face the center of the room, did a quick once-over before resuming the mock inspection of my rifle. Four bright-orange thermal shapes, standing imposingly taller than any of us. Each of them ready to pounce.

"Any ideas, Spartan?"

"Flashbang first. I'll take out the one on top of Holmes. The one behind me is going to chase after me as soon as it recovers, so gun it down as soon as the flash happens. We'll have to regroup on the last two at the door if the others can't engage quick enough."

"We won't have much time."

"I know."

"Alright, I'll inform the others."

I glanced around once more.

"Marines, don't acknowledge any of what I'm saying. Don't make any sudden movements. Just keep doing what you're doing and keep your heads down. We've got four camo'd Elites in the room. They're holding fast pending a visual on the VIP. We're going to take them out real soon, so I need you all to switch optics to thermals. Amy's going after the one on top of you, Holmes. I'm gonna take care of her threat, and the rest of you focus fire on the two guards at the door. Set your optics to full polarization. We're kicking this party off with a flashbang. We'll only get a couple seconds at this. Acknowledge only with a ping. One ping only."

A series of blips on the HUD signaled that everyone understood.

"As you were."

Amy slowly unlimbered the cylindrical grenade and slid it down past her hip, hovering it there.

I turned and nodded at Amy, spoke loudly, "Alright, there's nothing useful in here, Marines. Let's explore the rest of the—" "

A crack as loud as thunder and a blinding white light filled the room.

Amy's lunge toward Holmes' attacker was so swift my aim on her Elite faltered, but with such speed the assassin assigned to the Spartan had no chance of inflicting any harm on her. Both aliens were neutralized in an instant. I emptied half the magazine into my target while all other Marines sent an overwhelming barrage toward the ones furthest away. Once they fell to the floor, I glanced over toward Amy just in time to see Holmes' adversary on the ground beneath her feet twitching and writhing. She raised her armored boot in the air and brought it swiftly down atop the alien's skull and it simply exploded beneath.

"All hostiles neutralized." Amy announced.

Cordite and smoke wafted in the air as I switched the VISR optics back to normal. Another body hit the floor and we all glanced toward Holmes, now on his knees clutching at his stomach.

"Amy, keep eyes on the doorway!" I yelled.

I rushed toward him as every other Marine crowded around.

"Fuckin' bastard sucker punched me." Holmes said, coughing up a spat of blood.

"Status?" Amy asked.

I glanced Holmes over, then me and the Gunny instinctively looked at one another and I knew in an instant how much blood he'd already lost. An artery was opened wide by a fatal slash of the energy blade. Though cauterized at the site, the adjacent wounding had opened up and I could feel my knees beginning to soak as I knelt next to him. Even if we teleported back to the ship this instant, he wouldn't make

it. Even if someone had a whole liter of compressed biofoam on-hand, he wouldn't make it. I choked back tears and forced a steady tone.

"Got hit good, Amy, but Holmes can fight this one out."

Amy glanced back for an instant, wordless. I couldn't tell what she was thinking, but I hunched she knew exactly what happened and that I was putting on a good show. She refocused aim on the doorway to the bunker.

I pulled from my ruck a micromorph inhalant.

"Here, breathe deep so it doesn't hurt. We're gonna have to move you outta here."

Elation took a hold of Holmes at the first breath, then he started to inhale deeply and rhythmically, his respiration and pulse rate quickly diminishing, emulating that of a deep sleep.

His lids started to sag and I knew it wouldn't be long.

"Hey, sir, you remember that time you patched up my arm at the North Side bunker?"

"Yeah. I remember that."

"There were medics there. Why'd you do it?"

"Because you were right there."

"Gunny always liked you."

"Easy, Holmes. Relax."

"You always made his job easier. Butâ€|honestly I don't think this will be healing any time soon."

"Don't say that, Staff Sergeant. Who's gonna be my level-headed NCO if you take on that kind of attitude?"

"They're all good troops, sirâ€|" He said, voice trailing off into silence.

Peacefully, without pain, Staff Sergeant Blake Holmes' eyes closed, never to open again.

I waited a moment, looked down and realized I'd been holding his hand the whole time. With the other, I placed a palm over the Marine's neck and grabbed hold of his dog tags, yanking them free, stowing them into my ruck. A tradition no Marine took joy in.

"You lived your life with honor. To those before you, Staff Sergeant. Go home."

Anything more I could say was abruptly ended as ceiling tiles started to shift out of place, revealing a crawl space from which legs started to protrude. All rifles were trained upward and subsequently lowered as UNSC standard issue boots thudded into the deck. There stood a withered, tattered Rear Admiral Osman. She instantly favored

her left leg after the fall and nearly fell to one side before Amy stood her back up with an outstretched arm.

"Ma'am." She said. "Are you injured?"

She waved the Spartan off. "No, I'm fine. Thank you." She started scraping back a tuft of disheveled, dirt-black hair, glancing down at her uniform in self-disgrace. She looked up and offered a weary smile. "Just a little out of regs is all."

She gazed softly upon our fallen, then at me. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Is there anyone else we should search for?"

That's when she started to recollect the climax of her ordeal, the shock fully weighing her down. Claspings her hands over her waist, the tears came lightly as she recalled her recent memory. "No, I'm all that's left here."

"Understood, ma'am. Let's get you to safety."

Amy nodded at me.

I nodded back. "Time to go."

I took a hold of us all and instantly we were back inside the bay of _Blink Once._

The Admiral instantly fainted into Amy's powerful arms, the Spartan gently dragging the senior officer by the wrists toward a medical stretcher.

Marines hefted Holmes to an adjacent stretcher and sat down next to him, just staring off into space.

I marched to the pilot's chair and keyed the ship's transmitter.

"Rosetta, execute the autopilot routine and get us the _hell _out of here."

* * *

><p>The reactor room was predictably quiet and barren of activity except for the pair of scientists standing idly near a snack dispenser, chatting casually.<p>

The quiet I currently found myself in was like a long-forgotten treasure, easy to have been left behind in times like these because it is usually accompanied with solitude. But once it's there, it's precious. And I everything I was doing, everything I had on my mind began to slow. I had the Transit in-hand and was about to look for that strange symbol again, but then a pang of grief surged from within, the realization that someone I knew well would never be seen or heard from again. In this silence, I knew I'd have trouble letting go of Holmes, my first friend in Lima Company.

Through glassy eyes, I looked and there it was, waiting for me.

The dark-purple interloper.

I dried my eyes with a sleeve as it pulsed on and off, on and off, repeatedly, never stopping. Was it always there and I had only recently noticed? As before, it then overtly advertised its presence by ringing itself in the same bright-yellow I'd seen when I took notice the last time. Was it signaling me, aware of my awareness? I reached out an index finger, bringing it closer, and it began to pulse even faster. I made contact and it disappeared.

Everything stopped.

Removing my hand entirely from its surface, there was nothing. Not even the shapes and symbols representing the physical reality of my surroundings. Nothing.

In an instant, the pitch-black sphere became a blinding chrome one. The reflection of myself was vivid and startling, the scientists across the room taking notice. I immediately walked away and tucked the mirror-like Transit beneath my torso. As I exited the area, I brought its display to bear again, noticing that all the symbols and shapes reappeared. It was in that instant that my footsteps lost traction against the deck and I was floating. A second later, I fell back to the deck, landing on the soles of my feet.

"Whoa."

* * *

><p>Transit stowed beneath canvass, I headed to the bridge. I needed the Doctor's immediate counsel.<p>

The sphere was so bright that its shine was subtly oozing outward beneath the woven strands of opaque cloth that obscured it. Nothing else had changed, though, only the visible alteration it had undergone since I chanced activating whatever function the new symbol on its surface represented. Passerbys nodded but I ignored their greetings. Passing through the ship's main artery, I caught site of normal space outside the thick windows and I knew we'd exited slipspace early. I quickened my pace to the bridge.

Others took notice of the view outside and were conversing about it as I sped past.

I then opened a private channel to the command deck.

The CNI's signaling prompts were going through but weren't being acknowledged. I kept trying.

No answer.

I queued the request as highest priority.

Every time I checked on its status, it kept getting bumped lower and lower on the queue list. I then sent off a series of urgent requests as never-ending attempts spaced in one-second intervals, flooding the queue and bumping out all others. The ship's registry would become saturated with my traffic and whoever it was that was keeping my requests from getting through to the command deck would soon have no choice but to deal directly with me.

"Lieutenant Pennington," Rosetta said to me, "Captain Lawson and the entire Bridge crew are trying to troubleshoot a slipspace course deviation. This could take a lot of time. Please refrain from any future attempts to contact the Captain. He will gain contact with you when he is ready."

"I really need to speak with him. It's very important."

"Our tasks take precedence over yours, I'm sure."

"Fine, I'll walk."

Within the next minute, I strode in unannounced through the entryway to the bridge, approached the command chair and tapped the Captain on the shoulder.

He only glanced rearward for an instant before saying, "What is it, Lieutenant?"

He was engrossed consulting his displays, scrolling through pages and pages of diagnostic reports and equipment event logs he was inundated with just as all others here undoubtedly were.

"Sir, I've been trying to get a hold of you."

"I know. Rosetta says you're quite insistent."

"Where's the Doctor? I have some very important questions for him."

"He departed for re-assignment shortly after the strike mission briefing at Sigma Oh-Four."

"And he didn't even say goodbye?"

Lawson never broke visual contact with his tasks while replying. "I'm sure he would've, but his transfer to Earth was immediate. Man's in high demand. Pennington, can't you see we're extremely busy?"

"And I think I know why, sir."

Lawson then finally withdrew from his fast-scrolling reports and squared his gaze directly at me.

"To the conference room, Lieutenant."

He paced away and I followed closely in tow, the veiled Transit tucked firmly in my grasp.

He paced through the doors to the Conference room and immediately about-faced toward me. "Well, what is it?"

I removed the canvass bag and his first reaction was rearing back where he stood.

"How did you come by this? When did it happen?"

"Did you or Rosetta pick up a loss of ship's gravity a while ago?"

"No."

"Okay, so then it was just confined to my local area then."

"You're saying the Transit caused the gravity to go out on only you? Where did it happen?"

"I was near the reactor room at the time. So, it must've set us off course when the new object appeared on its surface. It changed itself, sir."

Lawson was silent, thinking.

"Does it function anything like a slipspace drive, sir?"

"Not really. Why do you ask?"

"It did set us off course. I can't think of anything else that would've done that. And it played with the ship's gravity. These events occurring so close together can't just be coincidence."

"Do you have knowledge of space-time continuum and the slipstream?"

"Only vague knowledge."

"Well, light-speed is the upper limit. The only reason anything can travel faster is that there is no known limit to the rate at which space itself can expand. FTL drives and the Transit's manipulation of space-time, in theory, work similarly. Where they differ is that the Shaw-Fujikawa translight engine is principled on encapsulating just enough nine-dimensional space over and around a vessel and propelling it along within that theoretical bubble. It simply contracts space in front of us and expands space behind us to create the momentum needed to get somewhere, whereas the Transit is purely teleportation. Anywhere in an instant. It doesn't quantize spatial data on the fly like the FTL engine does. The Transit it has all the spatial data of the universe stored within it. It is the universe. Or at least an exact replica of it."

"When the new symbol came into being and activated, everything hiccuped. Including the gravity."

Lawson's demeanor instantly changed and he took a chair, relaxing his posture in the form-fitting contours. For the first time since I met the naval Captain, a flighty pitch was audible in his normally sturdy tenor.

"N-now, Doctor Kleiner did mention the possibility of something. It was wild even for us, but we hadn't looked into it. He planned on investigating it sooner or later, but never had the time to, you see. Too many other priorities. General LeMay and his damned deadlines." Lawson scoffed. "Anyways, it had to do with its core ability to map everything, the fabric of space-time. The Transit always presented to us an extent to which it could teleport things. We knew exactly how far we could go based on what energy it had in store and what we were teleporting, but Kleiner wasn't convinced he'd seen it all. He was certain that it was capable of more, something we couldn't yet understand. It was just his own theory. But maybe," Lawson gestured

at the sphere with his whole hand, "just maybe, this is it."

"Something more. Extra capacity for longer jumps?"

Lawson stood, all the while never taking his sight off the Transit.

"He said its reach was finite, but unbound. Only limited by the energy stored within it at any given time. He never elaborated on it. I never obligated him to because the mission at Zaragosa Prime was carried out in full and a complete success. But during the evals, as you know, we placed it within high-current energy fields during your battles and we saturated it with gamma radiation just before we all fled to the moon. We got out of it what we put in, plain and simple, no punches pulled and none given. But after everything that happened and everything that the Doctor said, I had the assumption we'd never allowed it to take on its full potential. Like there was something we needed to activate or unlock. A hidden threshold we just couldn't approach with our methods."

"Sir," I said, placing the Transit on the table, "I have a confession to make."

Lawson then broke his gaze on the bright chrome mirror and looked to me.

"I haven't refueled it. It's been in the same state since we left Troy, but I'm somehow still able to continue teleporting ever since this happened. Sir, I believe it has no limits now. Ask me to teleport the _Thermisticles _to Reach right now and I'll make it happen."

He sat down again. "You're certain?"

"Yes, sir, it's getting the energy from somewhere, but not from any of our sources."

He continued to stare. "No, no, don't do that. We ought to know where it's new energy comes from first. Ideally this should be tested and documented in the right setting."

"Have you or the Doctor ever seen this reflective type of appearance?"

"No."

"But it does mean something."

The Captain then inhaled deeply, a kind of explosive breath someone takes when confronted with an impending decision incredibly scrupulous.

"There's only a few things we know for certain. Its greatest science we've been able to understand has to do with the reconstruction process itself. When anything is teleported and reassembled any distance away, Kleiner said it was possible that the object is not entirely composed of its original matter anymore, but rather copies of its former self rearranged."

"Where would it get this extra information from?"

"From the host object, actually."

"I don't understand. Why not relocate the original whole instead of breaking it down and reassembling somewhere else?"

"Not just somewhere else, Pennington. Some_when _else. Remember, this is teleportation. Do it over a great enough distance, and you've just trumped Einstein's equations. You've officially gone back in time. Reassembly then becomesâ€|necessary."

"Why's that?"

"Because over distance and time, particles move. They need to. They have to be able to resonate freely in space. This reassembly accounts for all the particle movements an object could and would experience over the executed change in distance and thus time. Its process is responsible for getting every part of you to the destination as you normally would in slower terms. Otherwise...well...I don't even want to think about an otherwise. It wouldn't be a good thing, let's just say that. So, it's a quantum-tunneling process that's unavoidably more efficient than sayâ€|encapsulating something massive inside of a shockwave much like the _Thermisticles _is undergoing now."

"Sort of like processing information in parallel rather than serial."

"Yes, something like that. Like I said, we never had the time to do a proper study beyond mission objectives, but if you're interested in it, research something called the Banach-Tarski Paradox. That'll spin your head for a minute or two."

"Anything else you feel is pertinent that I should know?"

"Well, whatever built this thing, it was built with humans in mind. We know this because it responds to our inputs, discerns operators' intent and can even simplify the process of teleportation to better facilitate that intent." Lawson shifted in his seat. "We found an imprint of a human hand beneath the Foreclay Outpost. I don't know if you saw it in the mines on the way to the laboratory. Carbon dated to over a hundred-thousand years ago."

"I missed that."

Lawson stood. "This has been a real advancement in our limited usage of the Transit. Thank you, Pennington. We'll see what becomes of it. Keep me updated, and feel free to pick the brains of some scientists in your idle time. I know they've got plenty of it themselves since they're letting Rosetta run most of the show."

"I just might do that."

"In the meantime, I think it'd be a good idea to have yourself and Lima Company get plenty of rest. And I expect you'll arrange a service for Staff Sergeant Holmes."

"Aye, sir."

"Everyone needs it. I hate to put it like this, but the sooner we

move on from it, the better. For now, I've got to find out where we are and get on track again. Time is getting short for us. Need to be on the move."

"Can you say anything about what's ahead, sir?"

"I can only say that it will be our most important mission yet."

21. Waste Not, Want Not

****Waste Not, Want Not****

Another day away from home
>Another journey to sell
Another place we've never been, another day in hell

Another day and a selfless deed
>Another reason to bleed
Another world that you're blind to, that you've already seen

Another piece of us is dead
>Another mourning to tend
Another promise that only bends, that offers no amends

Is this all for something?
>Do we give for nothing?
Do we strain for victory, no matter where it ends?

The notepad stowed into the nightstand, the ceiling tiles blurred from sight, I lay and reflected on the past in the soft light of my quarters. Writing out experiences was often the best way to put things into perspective, at times the only way. This was another rare chance to reflect, to find the strength to move on. Despite possession of a miracle weapon, Lima Company wasn't special enough to move backward. We could only go forward. Lawson had assured me that the rescue op was a complete success and to put it behind me despite losing one of our best riflemen.

And I'd lost a dear friend.

Silence and solitude preceded these outpourings of reflection that often couldn't be summoned otherwise. I couldn't express these thoughts among the Companyâ€"that would indeed set us backward in a sense. Now, the _Thermisticles_ was en route to the next colony, another world whose mission would be the defining moment in Lima Company's so-far momentous, albeit hurried calling. Operation Island Hop would soon be at an end. Whatever lied beyond, only success or failure could tell. Our captain ordered all of us to rest during this journey as there were no preparations necessary. We were idle. No functions for Lima Company to carry out. And yet he told me directly that the most important mission was upon us.

I could only wait and wonder.

* * *

><p>I'd fallen asleep again.<p>

Rising to start my waking routine, I was hurried as usual but soon realized I was without purpose. I had to force myself to slow if only to pass the time more efficiently. This was a paradox for us all and it felt criminal to enjoy the amount of rest we had during this portion of the journey. The contrast to everything that had already transpired was polarizing. I hadn't kept track of how much time elapsed since our latest departure, either. Everything had been a blur. Everything had been perceived as one, sprawling day full of crucial events stitched together as I recalled what we'd endured. After all this time and this much effort, it felt to me that Lima Company required some sense of purpose above all else. We knew where we were eventually headed, though the in-betweens had sparked uncertainty of when we'd get there. Some were beginning to wonder if we would ever get there.

The Captain had made assurances that we'd earned the reprieve and to yet again take full advantage of it. The latter part was our challenge.

A knock at my door was a welcomed change to this dreary day I'd woken up to. I'd spent enough time alone.

I opened the door and there stood Rios, his rank upgraded since we last spoke.

"What's up, Top?"

"Couldn't help but notice every time we stop somewhere there's Covenant. And we are making a beeline to Reach, more or less, right?"

"What are you saying, Covenant taking a stab at Reach? I don't know about that. Security posturing at Reach is probably the most robust it's ever been, and if we have our way there'll be a lot of heavy hitters staging from there in short order."

"What do you mean?"

"Can't say for sure at this time. I've received word there could be a big mission waiting for us there, but it's still undecided. We have one last op to carry out, then we'll know for sure."

"Sounds exciting, sir. Hopefully I'll be your first to know."

"Makes sense, you being senior enlisted. I was going to hit the gym and throw some weight around. Can you spot?"

"Maybe later, sir. Got some counseling to do for some of the troops. Any word on Holmes?"

Just hearing the name stopped me short of thought, removing me of the present tense.

"Sir?"

I hated talking about him, especially the details, but I couldn't avoid it forever.

"His last will states he's to be returned to his homeworld for burial. His coffin will be sent via slipspace and his family will

take custody of him when he gets back to Earth. Before he's jettisoned, we'll hold a service for him at the launch bay."

* * *

><p>I had worked up a good sweat and a voluminous pump in my pull muscles. The burn was intense. After so much sedentary activity in slipspace, it felt good to finally get moving again, to stimulate metabolism. Moving on to break down some of the push muscle fibers, I was cognizant of someone else entering the gymnasium with heavy footfalls. It could only be a Spartan. She was always armored.<p>

I re-racked the weights and stood up to see her approaching me directly.

"Sir," she said, "the daily update on Sergeant Blunt."

"Thank you, Spartan. I saw the video of you with Sergeant Blunt and the Master Sergeant. I commend you two for taking the initiative getting him debriefed, or at least trying to."

"Thank you, sir."

"So, any progress since that initial encounter?"

"Very little. He's still too rattled. Can't get a good read on him, myself. We feel he won't be the same for quite some time."

"Alright, that's fine. I don't expect him to turn a corner overnight. Just keep giving him the gentle nudge."

"And you, sir, how are you?"

"Me? Wellâ€"

"â€"Do you really need to be exercising at this time?"

Amy drew closer to me and sat down on a flat bench, the very first time I saw her take a seat. It was uncharacteristic of her to relax, at least in front of anyone else, but she seemed quite at ease doing it this moment. Her attention on me didn't waiver.

"Sir, have you been sleeping well? Feeling well?"

"Actually, yes, it's just when I do fall asleepâ€"

"â€"You're stressed."

The Spartan was adept at reading me despite her lack of interaction with people in general.

"I've been having these dreams."

"About?"

"Everything that's happened. Things that might happen. Or things that might never happen."

"He told you about the importance of the next mission, so I know it's on your mind. It's normal to undergo this kind of stress, considering

what's at stake. Concentrate on proper rest then."

"This last one, thoughâ€|"

"Go on, tell me."

I swept away the sweat clinging to my brow. "Weird. I was in battle. All of us. I think it was Zaragosa. Can't be sure where it was exactly. Anyway, it was dawn. We got ordered to take some hill just before sunrise. Maybe it was the North side. Well, as we got to within reach of the summit, we started taking heavy fire. A few of us started to go down. You kept charging upward and I saw you fall. I had the Transit in my hands and I wanted to save everyone right then and there. I had the power to do it."

"But you couldn't."

"I hesitated."

"Why?"

"When I looked inside, I saw Sergeant Blunt knife Gunny Smith in the back."

"Anything else?"

"That was the only thing I saw. Everything ended right there."

Amy fell silent and stared at me. Just the golden reflection of myself in her visor.

"Pretty weird, huh?"

"Don't think too much about it, sir."

I nodded.

"You've got a lot on your mind and you need more rest. That's how you can best prepare. You need to be fresh. We all do, but you most of all. Everything now depends on you."

She stood.

"What do you mean by that?"

"If you ever wanted to do me a favor, don't fail the Captain's next mission." The Spartan withdrew. "Get your rest."

She walked away.

* * *

><p>Holmes' coffin lied below.<p>

Halfway through the workout, Amy finished what she had to say and left the gym in her usually-abrupt manner, and then I lost all motivation as Holmes entered my thoughts again. The thought of failingâ€of losing everything Lima Company had fought forâ€brought back the memories of everyone that we'd lost along the way. It was worse than to die in battle, in a way, failing those that had come

beforeâ€”who sacrificed so others could continue carrying the mantle they preserved and passed along in safe keeping. At least they had given their all and never faltered. Holmes and Smith and othersâ€”I could hear their voices. Their faces were still vivid. All they ever wanted to do was help others and protect them, take down as many Covvie as they could alongside any Marine. We'd be moving on without them. Those of us left fighting were robbed. Not just as troops, but as people.

I just couldn't fathom the depth of their contribution as I gazed off an observation deck and into the cavernous launch bay.

Holmes' makeshift tomb was already prepared for its final journey, sealed off from the outside and fueled just enough to send the Marine homeward.

I was alone. The slightest of movements triggered echoes.

Further out, Lima Company's small Pelican fleet and a lone Prowler occupied the deck. They were as still and silent as the FTL casket below. Like the casket, they were just empty vessels, just inert bodies. The view before me would be my final memory of him. This would be my closure upon his departure from Lima Company. A beat of footsteps was tugging at my dulled awareness as I held in the sight of it all. The footsteps stopped right next to me and I glanced sidelong at Sergeant Haze standing there, the NCO looking outward from the mezzanine just as I had been.

"He was my first friend in Lima Company too. Watched him start out as a PFC. Ranked up fast and he deserved it. It's like all the good ones never make it."

"I know."

"Guess you couldn't have stopped it from happening. Just didn't see it coming. Maybe it was just inevitable, Transit or no."

"It was my failure, I admit. Just knowing he's gone isâ€”I'm sorry. I can't speak of it now."

"It's hard, I know, but the only way to solve a problem is to first admit there is one. Sooner or later, sir, you're gonna have to start coming to grips with your predicament. Because it's started to become all of ours now."

"What predicament is that?"

"Your shortcomings as a leader. Look, there's no easy way to say this so I'll just go ahead and say it. The unit would rather you step down and recommend a suitable replacement, someone with more field experience and the proper mentoring. I think you're beginning to understand that. And it's not your fault. You weren't prepared for this role. I know you mentioned to the Captain before all this that Rios would've been the best pick for command. That's why I don't hate you for everything."

"Aye, I did protest, but the Captain wouldn't budge. He had my feet nailed to the floor."

"Maybe it's best if we make him budge. It's happened before, you

know. Other units. In the movies. The majority factor is a strong one, even in military hierarchies. And we no doubt have that in our favor. It can be done."

"How would you go about doing it?"

"There's ways."

"Like what happened to Blunt and his crew?"

Haze scoffed. "No, man, nothing extreme. But something. We have to try something."

"I don't know, Haze. I just don't know. Lawson is firm. He's dead-set. And this is a unique mission we've found ourselves in. We're not just an infantry unit anymore. Quite frankly, we never were, even at Zagosa."

"Gunny Smith knew what was up, Penn. He buffered us from Command pretty well because he had experience. Vast experience. I think we can all agree it was better during the Smith days. Rios is up for that role, you know. We could let him take over."

"And do what? Tell Captain Lawson thatâ€"

"â€"I don't even want to hear that name. It sickens me to see what he's done to us."

"I know you're confused and I know exactly why you've been frustrated for so long. You never knew that the assembly of Lima Company was actually predicated on protecting the Outpost."

"Say again?"

"None of us knew back then, but we were to be absorbed into the Captain's command and eventually become his expeditionary fighting force from the start."

Silence.

Haze studied me through squinted, dissecting eyes.

"What are you suggesting?"

"He hand-picked every single Marine for Lima Company months before any of us stepped foot on Zaragosa Prime."

"_When_ did you learn of this?"

"Shortly after we were brought aboard the _Thermisticles_. Before my commission, he told me."

"Who else knew?"

"Only ones who knew from the start were the Doctor and Zero-Seven-One."

Again, silence as Haze contemplated this revelation.

I preempted.

"Haze, Lima Company is on a path to affect real change in this War. Call it glory if that's what you'd like. We ought to see this through. Lawson's put together a great team and envisioned probably the grandest, most meaningful offensive the UNSC could hope for. If we get blessed off by higher commands to move forward with that, we'll be guaranteed to strike directly at the Covenant. I'm talking about hitting them where it hurts and watching them struggle. Much more than payback. It'll be our comeback."

"Maybe. But even I know that Captain Lawson is just one man. His hopes and dreams aren't guaranteed. What is guaranteed is that a rookie Lieutenant has a Spartan for a personal bullet shield and gets anything else that he wants just as long as he subjects us to whims of some cavalier in white. Man hasn't seen real daylight or any kind of combat in God knows how long and thinks he can command a whole company of Marines. Yeah, I see Lima Company for what it's really become now in Lawson's image. This whole operation has become smoke and mirrors to me. And I'm not the only one. Anyone can see we're not doing real missions. All this jaw about the tip of the spear, tip of the spear, tip of the spear. We're at the tail end of it, chasing after guerillas dug into dead planets and precious admirals that have nothing to do with the lives of infantry troops. None of us are cut out for this. We're getting stale and losing people while doing it. We're out of our element. Whatever happened to Reach? Whatever happened to getting this unit back up to full strength and getting on with our lives, getting real assignments again? Clearly, the Captain doesn't trust this company anymore, sir. If he did, we would be on real missions led by real leaders. And I'm not saying you're a bad person, it's just that I don't look up to you as a leader. More like a brother who once shot the rifle beside me. Let's face it, you have little experience."

"I trust the Captain's judgment."

"After all we lost at Zagosa? What more should we squander foolishly? Didn't we already lose enough when we lost Gunny Smith?!"

"It was different with the Gunny, Haze. He volunteered. He knew what was at stake and he made the call."

"And now Holmes! Who's next?! Maybe Rios while we're at it!"

"Sergeant Haze, the Captain has you on his radar and obviously not in a good way. He's already bird-dogging me to do something about you. He sees you as insubordinate, and quite frankly so do I. I'm putting you on notice, Sergeant. I don't want to take it to the next level, I really don't. But if you continue to cross lines, I'm going to have to do something because I'm not going to make it his problem. Because if it becomes his problem, you know what happens. Everyone gets punished for your insubordination, not just you and me. Don't make it everyone else's problem. And by the way, I can't think of anything great the UNSC achieved that didn't involve sacrifice. No one in Lima Company has died in vain, so maybe it's time to start believing. While you do, I'm going to prepare Holmes for slipspace. There's a service for him in one hour. I trust you'll be there."

"Aye, sir." Haze barked. "I will be. Holmes was my friend. He was a friend to everyone in this unit. And everyone is heartbroken just

as much as they are confused about how this keeps happening. Will you be elaborating on that during your eulogy?"

I turned and walked away, saying over my shoulder, "If I could promise that no one in Lima Company would die, I'd do that. But I can't. You know better, Haze. Nothing's guaranteed. What do you think Smith would say about that little fact? What do you think he'd say about you right now?"

* * *

><p>"Sir, Second Lieutenant Pennington reporting as ordered."<p>

Captain Lawson customarily replied, "At ease."

"How's that Vice Admiral doing?"

"She seems to be over the shock and fairly quickly. She had some questions about you and your team, and how you got teleported to the prowler. I had Rosetta brief her. Too busy for that myself."

"You called me here. Is this regarding the next mission?"

"Yes. Heraklyon."

"Where's Heraklyon?"

"Exactly." Lawson chuckled. "It's a few light-decades from Reach. UNSC's turned it into an off-the-grid base for operational test and evals. It's where the most promising prototypes go to get approved for operation or rejected and sent to the grave."

"Is this conveyable to the troops?"

"You might as well go ahead and tell them. We draw nearer to Reach and, well, we can't keep it a secret forever. Besides, Lima Company has proven itself to me. In my view, you're all ready. Now, you must prove to others that Lima Company is ready."

"To theâ€"

"â€"A group of people that will ultimately grant us permission to proceed past what we are now. The key stakeholders have all gathered at our next stop, waiting for our arrival. We'll present the Transit's capabilities to them for assessment and await their decision."

"How soon?"

"Quite soon. In fact, we'll be entering normal space within the hour."

"Sir, I have a send-off about to commence for Holmes."

"That's fine. I understand. Go handle that."

"Sir, will you be there? It'd mean a lot to them if you showed."

"If not for the next stop, I'd attend. Please relay my condolences to

the unit."

"Aye, sir. After it's done, should Iâ€"

"â€"Rosetta will brief you. I'll already be planetside."

* * *

><p>"Holmes was a dedicated man, to the uniform and to everyone."<p>

It was evident that the lot of Lima Company agreed as they listened and I spoke at the position of attention.

"It's his example that any Marine would strive to emulate in keeping with the extraordinarily high standards Lima Company esteems. With him, we built this unit into something special. Without him, we'll continue to build it in his honor and the honor of all others who gave everything. Staff Sergeant Blake Holmes is released from service, sent home to rest in peace."

I about-faced and placed my sights to the dark capsule steadily floating away from our ship, and shouted, "Present arms!"

As one, all of Lima Company rendered salutes.

Holmes' craft picked up speed as a disc of white light materialized some distance ahead of its trajectory. He entered that realm and disappeared, never to be seen by Lima Company again.

"Order arms!"

Lima Company finished its salute to Staff Sergeant Blake Holmes.

In the next moments, I saw everyone off as one by one the Marines ascribed their names into a Mylar plaque that was to accompany the folded UNSC flag. Holmes' family would at least have some idea of who we were and who their son was while stationed so far away. Similar tokens were done before, but the mood was perceptibly more somber this time. I was the last one to etch my name, and when I finished I was again alone in the launch bay. It was done. Lima Company had closure. The unit could move on from here. I climbed in one of Lima Company's Pelicans and stowed the items into a slipspace canister resting on the co-pilot's chair. They'd be sent off soon enough. Now, the Captain was waiting at the planet's surface.

An Iso-Rosetta took control of the dropship and we cycled out of the launch bay.

A small rocket burn and the Pelican righted about to face Heraklyon.

"Do you talk?" I asked.

"You've seen me talk." Rosetta replied.

"I meant do you ever initiate the conversation or do you just respond when needed?"

"I am a class seven A.I." She retorted matter o'factly. "I have my

moods just like you."

"What's your mood now?"

"Anti-social."

I laughed. "Okay. Tell me about Heraklyon."

"It's a proto-world still forming in the system's accretion disk, tidally-locked to the host star. The system as a whole is remarkably stable considering the amount of independent objects, but the only stable portions of the planet's biosphere are at the very edges."

"The twilight zone."

"Yes. You can see a few moons out there coalescing in the distance."

From the ship's present position outside of Heraklyon's atmosphere, it appeared as though all the rocky bodies encircling the planet were quite comfortable in their orbits. An emerald-green gaseous haze bound it all together in one, continuous band.

"That's interesting. So, why did we split up?"

"You and Captain Lawson?"

"Yes."

"It's a formal evaluation, Lieutenant. They want you in the dark so as to provide a true test of your abilities as well as the Transit's. You can have no prior knowledge of the test and its components. It's double blind."

"I see."

The Pelican initiated its descent through the uppermost reaches of atmosphere. The nose cone and underbelly groaned under the stress as flames licked at the edges of the forescreen. Passing through clouds, Rosetta had taken on a slim trajectory that had the dropship dropping at a very steep angle. The glide path was none at all. The ship was almost free-falling. I increased tension on the restraint harness to remain fully upright and alert.

"Sorry for the dive, Lieutenant. We have to pass through this weather system quickly."

"What weather system? It's perfectly clear."

"And that's because of super-sonic gusts. Be glad we're in a tail wind."

"How long until we land?"

"Not soon enough."

"I hope the mission doesn't fail because of some gusts."

"It's like this all the time, sir. At least, on the lit side of the

world. Conditions at the twilight gap should be infinitely more favorable."

The ship streaked downward, howling through the air. I glanced at the inclinometer and it read 315°. A forty-five degree dive straight to our destination. Glancing up, I saw the ground just racing closer and closer. It was mostly rocky with very little greenery. The air temperature outside the hull and the hull itself began to cool and the ambient light began to dim rapidly as though the Pelican had just pierced through a cloud layer. Rosetta began to taper off the descent angle gradually. During the middle of her maneuver, the air speed suddenly dropped off dramatically and I lurched forward into the tight grasp of the restraints. The blood pooled in my face and I nearly fell unconscious, just before feeling the fear of a complete stall.

"Okay, we're in the clear." Rosetta announced. "You'll be able to dismount soon."

For another fifteen minutes we coasted at a much more comfortable velocity, the horizon now leveled out. I loosened the slack on the harness pads and took stock of the landscape now mere meters below. The craft slowed even more as I made out the length of a runway ahead. The Pelican touched down onto a barren, tarmac expanse. It seemed we were completely alone here. There weren't any ground guides out on the runway and there weren't even any fuel trucks or emergency vehicles seen, not even in the farthest distance or the adjacent taxiways.

"Where are we?"

"Just an active flightline thirty minutes from the test site."

"Why are we here?"

"We're a little early. The assessors haven't arrived yet."

"How long do we have to wait here?"

"They're running a little late, but we should get notification once they make their descent over there."

"Damn, I was ready to go."

"What kind of mood are you in?"

"Don't start."

* * *

><p>I woke from sleep as the Pelican began a new descent. I'd dozed off some time ago.<p>

Looking out and over the ship's broad cowlings, I could see only a dimly-lit flat plain flanked by forests that stretched for many kilometers. At its farthest end, it was met with the skyline of a metropolis. Silhouettes of high-rise buildings dominated that horizon beneath a panorama of moons and asteroids loitering beyond the clouds.

The ship thudded into the ground. The tail ramp opened immediately after touchdown and I made my way toward the opening. Marching downward, I saw only Captain Lawson there amid a clearing, his service dress bright and crisp as though it was brand-new and prepared exclusively for this day. His personal appearance was always well within regulation, but he seemed to have a particular glow about him this day. He obviously wanted to look as presentable as possible to our incoming benefactors.

"This place is where they used to test field artillery." He said. "These days, it's a MAC gun range. Look," he pointed, "you can see the scorch lanes beneath the shrubbery going all the way out to that mock-city."

"Sir, some scientists had a chance to analyze the Transit before I left the ship, and they said with high confidence thatâ€" "

A lone junior officer no older than me stopped the conversation short as he opened the hatch of a nearby observation bunker and marched toward us.

"Sirs, I'm Lieutenant Sorensen. I'm General LeMay's remote attachÃ© and he wanted me to inform you that the General will not be here today. He had to remain at Earth due to increased activity at the IRIS site."

I tried to re-engage the Captain, but a firing of retrorockets suddenly resounded throughout the region, startling us all and drowning out my voice. We collectively glanced upward and noticed a large vessel decelerating towards a landing pad very close to our vantage. The three of us backpedaled a few paces as the incoming craft slowed to a steady descent, a plume of dust thrusting outward then up in several places beneath its flat-bottomed hull. I covered my eyes and waited for the haze to settle.

Within a few seconds, the area was clear and there before us was a giant box car resting atop the ground just a few steps away. It was bulky and wide, vaguely rectangular with thrusters on all four corners slowly cooling from bright orange to a dull red. The vessel appeared to have the shape of a giant brick, hardly a wieldy or aeronautic vehicle, meant only for ferrying people to and from orbit. A blast shield retracted on its longest face and revealed an equally wide, clear plate of very thick plexiglass separating us from a host of visitors all seated in luxurious chairs. They were all in military service dress. Each of them appeared to be pressed for time, this stop likely being just one of their many items on today's agenda. Most of their faces were currently absorbed into their datapads and other devices.

"The ones looking at us," Lawson said, "those are the ones that already know. They've digested my Zaragosa reports in full. They'll be expecting something truly groundbreaking."

"You can say that again, sir."

He was absolutely correct. I wasn't close enough to see the whites of their eyes, but I could see it in their posture through the giant pane. Some of them had rigid interest in us while the remaining panel of so-called judges was content to converse casually amongst one another or sip from drinks or access their communications, or all

three at once. The barrier was sound-proof. In perfect silence, the lot of them carried on while a select few motionlessly studied us and their surroundings, occasionally offering glance at the mock-city in the extreme distance. I couldn't know if they fully appreciated Lima Company's situation, what we'd done to get here or if they knew their decisions today could ultimately allow us to go even further. Their attention would be undivided soon enough, though. That much was certain.

"I just wonder if they brought along any popcorn in that stagecoach."

Lawson got a brief, subdued chuckle before the next arrival announced its presence from above, a lone Pelican shuttling down exuding far less of a commotion upon landing. The tail ramp immediately lowered and a man we'd made introductions with quite recently descended.

"That's General Vaughn, one of a few dissidents against the strike mission."

"I do remember him, the one grilling you at the briefing."

"Yes, quite skeptical. But I like skeptics. Especially the loud ones."

"Why's that?"

"Because once they're in your court, it leaves little doubt leftover from everyone else."

"Is he still in the minority? Seemed that way from the meeting at Sig Oh-Four, anyways."

"Yes, he is. But he's still got pull in the community and should not be discounted. And it's always a good idea to never, _ever _draw the ire of a senior official. Let's hear what it is he has to say."

The Marine General made his way toward us with powerful, effortless strides, never once breaking eye contact. Gentlemanly, nevertheless, he held out a hand at the Captain which meant he was forgoing any semblance of formality and releasing Lawson of any such. We remained at ease.

They shook and maintained eye contact.

"Captain Lawson, welcome to Heraklyon. And welcome, Lieutenant Pennington. Try not to let all the scenery distract you today. The ONI analysts have concocted a very tough set of scenarios. While these people behind you are accustomed to conventional weapons testing, they will no doubt appreciate your presentation once they see for themselves what kind of capabilities you're claiming with this prototypeâ€¦_if _it lives up to those claims. I'll be watching myself."

Lawson nodded.

"Thank you, General. We appreciate the notification and we hope you get a good view."

The General took one step closer to the Ship Commander, saying, "I've commanded thousands upon thousands of Marines in my service to the UNSC. You know the actuarial odds of command. You know how the odds turn out in this War. That's a lot of men never making it back home. One thing I've learned is never to promise fighting men anything you aren't ready to deliver in that instant, because the look in their eyes is what stays with you until the end. Heed those words, Captain."

"Aye, sir."

"I had a part in designing these tests in order to simulate what live combat with this weapon system might be like. It tests the device and the person operating to see, mainly, how quickly they can negotiate realistic, tough challenges. They watered it down. I wanted it to be much tougher than it actually is."

Vaughn stared at Lawson for a moment and nodded, then took a place off to the side of the VIP gathering.

The Captain turned to me, squarely grasping at my shoulders.

"The wait is almost over, Blake. Everything we've worked for culminates here. Just one more test to pass. They all you have a good fighting unit, but most of them only have a vague idea of what to expect today. These spectators are the most influential in the entire UNSC, so this is the pivotal time and place for Lima Company. The deciding hour."

"I've never seen this many senior officials before, sir. It's a snake pit."

"Don't you worry about them, just concentrate on the task. Your back will be facing them the whole time as you carry out whatever objectives there are anyway. Just remember that a triumph today means our next set of spectators will be the Covenant. We'll have them fearful of the UNSC. Respectful at the very least. Be thinking about that out there."

I nodded at my Captain.

"Knock it out of the park, Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"It's an oldâ€|never mind. Do the best you can, son."

"Aye, sir."

Another senior officer walked this way, an elderly female with the rank of vice admiral. This was a no-salute zone, though muscle memory almost had me stiffening for the position of attention just seeing her. I merely followed the Captain's lead.

"Captain Lawson," she said before stopping just in front of him, "I've read through everything. All your reports from the Zaragosa system, this prototype under test, everything. Very impressive, everything you've done. Some of us believe you've got some lofty claims, though. One thing is certain. Today's evaluation will either be your biggest success yet or your final career

move."

"Indeed."

"What is most intriguing to me is how you structured this tactical unit, Lima Company. I took the extra time while headed here to skim over the original unit roster. I also took the time to review the current unit roster and compare the two. Did a double take at one name in particular."

"The name?"

She glanced upon me, her eyes drifting back to Lawson.

"Never mind." She said. "Thank you for rescuing Rear Admiral Osman."

"Glad I could be of help, ma'am."

"I won't forget it. If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know."

"Well, yes, there is something."

"Bearing in mind that it can have no effect on today's proceedings."

"It does pertain to this occasion, but it's more of a small favor if anything. Harmless."

"Go on."

"Well, there's someone here that I'd really like you to have a chat with."

"Name?"

"General Vaughn. He's the"

"Corps' Chief of Staff. Yes, I know."

"Right. He's standing right over there." Lawson pointed.

"And what is it you'd like me to discuss with this person?"

"When we get the greenlight after today's final evaluation, send him my way to give me the news."

She shrugged. "Okay. Something personal?"

"Mildly."

"You seem pretty confident in the face of the complexities of this exercise, Captain."

"More than confident today, ma'am. We're battle-tested."

"Good luck out there, regardless."

"Thanks," he grinned, "but we won't need it."

She arced a brow at him. Her last words were, "Pride go'eth before the fall."

My Captain's smile was steadfast, his eye contact with her unrelenting.

The Vice Admiral offered only a smirk at the Captain before she withdrew and retook her seat among the other dignitaries.

"That Rear Admiral you rescued is an executive officer for Vice Admiral Margaret Parangosky, who is the current head of ONI. Osman is no doubt preparing a field report for Parangosky as we speak. Coupled with our presentation here, I expect ONI at large will be propping us up on a pedestal."

"Understood."

The blast-grade window slowly retraced into the surrounding superstructure of the giant box car and the sounds of their voices could now be heard.

"Ok, it's time. I'll kick this presentation off by briefing these fine folk. Go ahead and take your place at the overwatch tower."

Captain Lawson marched to a central point before the small gathering of VIPs, a wide platform of solid steel raised a half-meter from the surrounding turf. Once a mounting foundation for heavy weapons fixtures, it was now little more than a stage from which to present a new type of weapon. He activated his neural broadcast frequency and cleared his throat, gaining the attention of our audience as I withdrew from the area.

"_Fighting the Covenant is never fair."_ He began._ "I'm sure every one of us knows that from personal experience. We're outgunned, outmaneuvered, outclassed in every way. As the UNSC gets pushed further and further back, many would say we're fighting a losing battle. It's hard to argue in light of the facts. Here and now, we will attempt to show you that with a proven prototype, we don't have to remain on the backfoot. You've all traveled far on short notice to be here and we thank you for your time. Please observe this demonstration with hope and an open mind, and with your favorable consideration of this weapon system I would submit to you that with it in our arsenal we won't just level the playing field—we'll slope it drastically in our favor."_

I stopped to glance back and detected a lull in their side conversations. Every one of the VIPs was now sitting erect, setting down their savory drinks. They had quieted into total silence following his commencement speech, much like Lima Company had when subjected to a similar showing in the mines below the destroyed Outpost. I climbed the final flight of stairs, once again looking down upon the crowd. They had their attention directed at the mock-city further outward, largely unaware of my presence at this time. I reached the top and gazed outward, scanning the distance. Much of the uninhabited skyline was only halfway constructed, easily seen from this vantage. Steel girders and pipes and powerlines were exposed at one edge of the vista. Even from this far away, I had to sweep my gaze a few degrees to take in the entire sight.

I unlimbered the Transit from the canvass and it shone brightly. Its mirror-finish captured everything in existence and displayed it all quite clearly. I peered inward, accessed its zoom capability. Wrecked vehicles and failed salvages were strewn about as if they had been parked during a metropolitan rush hour. The setting was even replete with park benches in the fully completed sectors. Corrugated, two-dimensional silhouettes of people and animals were propped up along finished sidewalks and green trails. This replicated environment had been continually broken down and rebuilt again from repeated live weapons testing.

Today's weapon test wouldn't involve firing a single shot. Complete silence would be my only noise.

I glanced down once more as Captain Lawson broke the seal of a cube containing a data chit which he removed and loaded into a display device. He read from it, "_The Operator will locate a single object and transport it for this first objective. It is a UNSC standard issue assault rifle, an MA-Five series weapon in the general vicinity of a park at grid A-Two. He will transport it to the end-zone, the area shaded in red just in front of where the Evaluators are seated. The first objective's test will begin now."_

The directions were clear and simple. I panned the Transit's display over the entirety of the metropolitan area, centered on it for the bird's eye view. Conveniently, the entire expanse had gridlines displayed holographically from emitters embedded into its grounds, and the borders revealed corresponding alphanumeric designators. It made finding A2 easy. The view was subsequently hovered over the park in question. By estimates, it was a rough kilometer by kilometer square of shaded greenery. Only a few small structures were within its perimeter, a clubhouse, some washrooms and a maintenance shed being likely among them. There was little doubt the objective was inside one of those buildings. I scanned the maintenance shed first and I found it instantly lying on a shelf inside. It appeared in the end-zone not five seconds later, on display up close for all to see.

I hadn't the chance to see their reactions for myself as the Captain announced the second test parameters immediately following the successful conclusion of the first.

"_The first objective has been successfully completed. The Operator will now be given a time-sensitive task for the second objective. He will locate a moving target and transport it to the end-zone within a thirty second timeframe from the start of the test. The object is an autonomous vehicle painted bright orange traveling a route from grid B-Ten to B-Twenty-Three at sixty kilometers per hour. Again, successful completion of this objective requires relocating the object to the end-zone within thirty seconds from the start of the test. The test will begin now._

I raced the display toward grid B10 to find the vehicle. It wasn't thereâ€”already ahead of me. Zooming the display slightly outward, I found it already crossing grid coordinate B15. Through city streets it drove. Other vehicles were parked to either side, moving pedestrians and animals and cross-traffic were all intentional distractions. Ten seconds elapsed. Zooming back in, the target was selected and relocated in another five seconds and placed into the

end-zone after a total of sixteen seconds. I now had feedback from the audience upon hearing the sounds of applause.

Captain Lawson remained objective, the VIPs quieting down as he proceeded directly to the next trial.

His voice was level as he read from the text, "_The final objective requires relocating multiple moving targets within a fifteen second timeframe."_

He paused. And so did I.

I glanced downward over my shoulder and saw him continue to read from the prepared script, everyone else further behind glancing at one another in silence.

"_The objects to be relocated are six greyhounds at the racetrackâ€¦"_

Preempting the final task, I found the racetrack with ease: the obtuse, ovular swath of land at the city's edge. Mechanical hounds were situated behind the gates. Hovering over that area, I waited for the word to be given.

"â€¦_The Operator must transport a minimum of three of these objects to successfully complete the objective. The test will begin now."_

I could already see the hounds loosed and sprinting around the circumference from the current view. It would take them much longer than fifteen seconds to lap, but I had less than that amount of time to win the day. With one hand, I swept the display to hold steady with the speed of those swift, hard-charging animals. Multiple swipes were needed just to keep pace. My other hand tapped at one of them, two of them, three. I had enough selected for transport to achieve the minimum mandatory required to pass the test. I hadn't known how much time went by as I executed the jump. All three made it into the end-zone.

I glanced back upon them all.

"_Thirteen seconds!"_

The entire gathering was on their feet, an uproar of cheers filling the area.

Lawson glanced up at me with a nod and joined in the standing ovation.

"_Well done, Pennington."_

"Thank you, sir."

"_You can deliver the news to Lima Company personally. Full disclosure. No more information blackouts."_

"Sir, do you think they've seen enough? Enough to ensure their approval?"

"_I'm certain of it. Look at them."_

"What about General Vaughn? He did say these tests were watered down. It'd be a shame not to win him over as well."

"_..Go ahead, but keep it subtle. Don't go crazy or anything."_

I peered into the Transit again. I could do anything at this point. Lawson was smiling ear to ear, something I thought I'd never see. His weapon system and mission proposal had become noticeably more palatable to these people that would decide their fates, and soon enough he'd have most (if not all) of them eating from the palms of his hands.

It wouldn't hurt to drive those points home.

A low-rise apartment in the city center was so new in its construction phase that it hadn't even been connected to city power or sewage yet, I could see as I zoomed in toward its foundation. I simply plucked the structure like it was a toothpick on a dinner plate and set it down in the end-zone. A plume of dust displaced as it fully settled into and flattened the turf with a loud thud. The outward spray nearly smothered everyone below me, though they were happy to be graced with such a miraculous showing. An identical building adjacent to the now-empty patch of land next to it was also ripe for the picking, and so it was promptly stacked onto the one I'd just transported like we'd all sat down for a game of Jenga.

We all felt like giants at this point.

We could do anything.

To thoroughly illustrate that notion, I gazed up and into the sky. The vast stretch of meadow before us was quite suddenly filled with one of many outlying asteroids orbiting this world, snatched from its path and placed here before us like some beach pebble. Again, uproar from the crowd.

They were all standing, starting to file out of their seats and into the field on their own accord, everything now purely unscripted. They meandered through the end-zone and met with Captain Lawson, forming a line to shake his hand.

"_Alright, Pennington. That's quite enough. I think you lit a fire beneath 'em."_

I could hear the exaltation in his voice upon issuing the stand-down. Next, he asked with a slight apprehension_, "Any change in the Transit's appearance?"_

"None, sir. It's stable as far as I can see."_

"_Okay, good. That'sâ€¦|"_

He was bombarded with people and conversation below.

"_Okay, let's give them time to digest and cast their votes now."_

"Aye, sir." I descended the tower. He waited where he was as the VIPs found their way back to their ship. "And congratulations, sir."

"_I couldn't have been possible without you and Lima Company. We did it."_

After the last one of them found their seats, he began his closing remarks.

"_So there you have it, distinguished guests. I think this will conclude the demonstration of the Transit and its capabilities. There's a lot to process, I can see you're still grappling with what you've witnessed. Put simply, the UNSC now has an unsurpassed tactical and strategic advantage against the Covenant. The way forward, upon your consideration, is for Lima Company to continue executing the UNSC's most high-value, time-sensitive missions. Issued to you now is an up-or-down vote on this matter. Take your time and confer with your counterparts. A neutral entity unaware of today's event will tabulate your decisions. Me, personally? I'm tired of losing to the Covenant. It's time we gave a show of force for once._"

Silence as the evaluators stared at the Captain for a moment, wavering their attention between him and the presence of incredibly massive objects that weren't present earlier. One by one, they took to their devices, all of them deep in thought as they weighed in on the matter with a low murmur that circulated amongst them. A naval captain and an infantry lieutenant shared in the aftermath of this field of battle. As we basked in that brief moment of triumph, a tremor filled the ground beneath us all. It caught me off balance and I nearly fell to my side, the reverberations grew suddenly ferocious. Further out, in the midst of the field the ground began to swell.

The seismic wave was headed this way as the shrubbery rippled along in one direction: ours. Once I saw the horror in the Captain's eyes, I followed his gaze over my shoulder to see it now passing beneath the grounded asteroid. Right behind the first wave was a massive secondary propagating rapidly in our direction from somewhere unseen in the far distance. It was tall as it was wide, splitting cloud tops and shattering the mock-city in its devouring wake. The only things visible beyond its forefront of pure haze were vortices of pulverized debris swirling violently, and only our extreme distance to the fallout was what afforded any reaction time to save ourselves. The concussive wave would reach us in only seconds.

The nearby Pelican's engines began to spool and the box car's payload rockets began to fire, but they'd all be consumed before gaining enough altitude. I gazed down into the Transit.

All people were quickly selectedâ€œ"

â€œ"now at the airfield two-hundred kilometers distant.

The resultant stare from all of them was the reward. So many people were terrified and gratified simultaneously. They scanned their new surroundings about the tarmac, clearly in awe to have experienced teleportation. There was only silence for a moment.

Lawson then transmitted, "_Subtle, Pennington. Very subtle._ _If any of them hadn't planned to sign off on Lima Company, they are strongly reconsidering now."_

I could only smile in reply.

* * *

><p>Everyone participating in the day's fateful event had reconvened at a reception area near the entrance to a small officer's club directly off the flightline. It was a wooden establishment, maybe some aesthetic preference of someone who was once in charge of this militarized proto-world. Flag officers had that kind of pull to spend discretionary money how they saw fit, especially if it was part of a leftover surplus budget. There was nothing much to the place. It seldom saw any use, after all. The wait staff currently consisted of two people, the bare minimum to receive guests for a building of this capacity. Two waiters with one of them doubling as the chef. It was likely they were only here to serve this congregation and then they'd move on just as we would, until the next small gathering arrived for some other weapons convention.<p>

We waited just outside in a private room while the evaluators finished making their decisions that would steer Lima Company's fateâ€”Captain Lawson's fate as well. Half an hour had elapsed since our sudden arrival here. It had been perfectly quiet. Neither of us spoke. We didn't indulge in the food and drink available to us. We were both still reeling ourselves. The wait staff was being debriefed by a pair of ONI field agents somewhere else, intimidating them into silence by way of signed non-disclosure agreements that contained official statutes warning of prosecution and legal penalties and the like.

In this silence, I remembered something that I had desperately tried to inform the Captain of before the test sessions began. It had all happened so fast.

"Sir, I wanted to mention to you that I had some scientists run a few more tests on the Transit before I followed you down here. With their instruments, they determined that the Transit no longer needs electromagnetic or nuclear energy to function."

He turned to face me. Any smile he had on his face these past few minutes had vanished. "What is it, then?"

"It's feeding off gravitons, now."

"That might explain the destruction that happened out there, as well as what happened on the ship."

"They suggested that it could harness interactions between any object, no matter how large or small, no matter how far away."

Lawson rubbed a hand at his chin, saying, "That would implicate a limitless energy source being utilized."

"Aye, sir, although one with great consequence." I pointed outward in the direction of the test site.

He nodded.

"They're probably still determining the extent of effects you caused on the planetary system as a whole, not to mention the fact that

there's a city-sized asteroid now sitting in the middle of their recently-demolished range."

"I get a pass, right?"

The door to our room swung open and there stood General Vaughn, the chief critic of Lawson's grand design. He walked inward and stopped just before us.

"I'm here to inform you that your weapon system and your mission proposals will be sponsored."

Lawson let out a sigh and patted me on the back.

"...With caveats."

Lawson leaned in and listened intently to what the General was about to say.

"Got word from the High Council that you have been given full support and a new tasking. The _Thermisticles_ and all her hands are to be given an aggressor role in Operation Red Flag. You'll get the details uploaded via secure channel. As soon as you're briefed, you'll proceed directly to Reach with orders." Vaughn shrugged, "And I suppose me being here to deliver the news is your way of saying gotchya. Well played, Captain."

"No, actually it's not. It's my way of personally saying thank you to yourself."

General Vaughn gave Lawson a wary, sidelong stare. "Thanks for what?"

"For helping us pull this off."

"I did?"

"Aye. You identified new challenges we needed to be aware of and overcome to make all this happen. You played the devil's advocate and gave us the missing perspective. Because of you, the proof of concept was arranged here at Heraklyon, and now everyone's onboard. Now, because of you, Operation Red Flag has another arrow in its quiver."

"Well, you pulled it off. Never thought it would happen. I was sure time was against you, but you did it. You have my best hopes, and of course my full support."

Captain Lawson and I assumed the position of attention and together we saluted General Vaughn. He saluted back, and I was certain the man cracked a subtle, fleeting smile at us.

"Good day, gentlemen, and that was one hell of a show."

We were then left to ourselves following the General's withdrawal.

Lawson breathed deep, saying, "Well, time to get back to the ship and find what Operation Red Flag is all about."

* * *

><p>"So, here it is," Lawson said, "the big one."<p>

He held a data chit aloft and I accepted it, stowed it in a pocket.

"Our orders, sir?"

"Yes. In summary, we're to rendezvous with the joint task force staging there. We'll be trailing the Pillar of Autumn into enemy territory, commanded by Captain Jacob Keyes. Our mission is to infiltrate and capture the mobile command post and take one of their leaders hostage to negotiate a truce with the Covenant. Failing that, we'll destroy the vessel and anything around it. There's extensive intel on our targets. It's all contained within those files, so keep the info secure. Make sure you brief Lima Company equally extensively while we're en route. Things will quickly speed up once we're in-place."

"Aye, sir."

We exchanged salutes and I exited the Command Deck.

As I walked through the main artery of the Thermisticles, every passerby offered greeting. The ship had taken on a new air of optimism and pride. All its inhabitants had endured the most harrowing trials. Everyone knew we were en route to Reach. Soon enough, they'd come to learn of Operation Red Flag and all its glory. And Lima Company would be in a journey of its own making. As such, I took the opportunity to generate an all-hands broadcast, informing them of the news.

"Marines of Zaragosa, as you know, we are headed to Reach at this time. We're finally on our way. Because of your efforts, we are on a path to take on the Covenant again. It starts with a new set of orders for Lima Company. We've got fresh intel on a Covenant flagship that's unaware we have knowledge of its presence. It's vulnerable, and we're going after it. Once we've made it to Reach, our new mission begins. Ready yourselves for the last briefing we'll ever need together. I'll see you soon."

* * *

><p>All the data had been released to our internal battle net. Every troop had access to the mission's every detail. I'd highlighted as many aspects as I could over the last hour inside this briefing room. Now, it was time to let the facets of this operation piece together and await their questions.<p>

There were none.

"So, then, thoughts?" I asked.

Seated before me in a square grid, members of Lima Company filled the room and remained motionless, some scanning through pieces of the op order.

"Well," Rios began, "it's a lot more gutsy than a straight demo of the vessel, but I can see the payout will be big if the mission's a

success."

On holo-display at the head of the room was that gargantuan mothership hovering listlessly, a planetoid-shaped body of colossal significance.

"Given what we're up against and what we're putting up against _it, _I'd say odds of success are high. I mean, we wouldn't even be doing this mission unless the ONI analysts and Highcomm officials determined it was worthwhile. If you tally all the assets in our favor, it becomes easy to see. We'll be linking up with some heavy-hitting ships fully stocked with naval and ground assets, ODSs, an impressive number of other Spartans, the most advanced A.I.s, and we've got the Transit."

This statement seemed to cause an instant morale boost among the troops. All attention was now on me.

"It's as good as it gets, Marines."

There was only silence now, everyone awake and poised to take action.

"Seems like we're all on the same sheet of music. And I can't wait to hear their screams as we murder Covvie on their own turf. Dismissed!"

Everyone rose to their feet and proceeded toward the exits.

* * *

><p>The mood at the ship's mess was noticeably different than times before.<p>

The troops knew their purpose this time, and it wouldn't change like the roller coaster our lives became in the recent weeks behind us. Now, the energy pervading the unit was up. No more uncertainty weighing them down.

This was a rare sight even apart from such an apparent optimism, for Lima Company was never a whole unit when dining. We'd slept in shifts onboard the _Thermisticles_, never a scarcity of on-duty personnel. Comings and goings to the mess were sporadic among us, some meals eaten entirely alone. Even if the company at-large happened to be gathered here at any time to share a meal, each instance since our departure from Zaragosa Prime was a hushed, swift passage in between missions. Looking around this time, I could see their eagerness to keep going.

This time, it wasn't just a means to fill our bellies prior to another mission, it was a cherished gathering we were lucky to be a part of.

Best of all, normal space in the Epsilon Eridani system was at hand in minutes.

Captain Lawson entered, the room momentarily pausing to offer him regards.

He made his way to the serving line, greeting all troops in his

midst, shaking their hands and offering what seemed from this distance an easy-going bout of idle chat. Many gave thanks to their commander, offering him a leapfrog ahead of them in the line. He graciously declined every one of them, insisting they should enjoy these moments, gesturing them onward with a smile.

Haze then approached. I took notice of him and gathered in an instant that his attitude had completely changed in these recent hours. His demeanor was certainly more forgiving than times before, and I witnessed a seldom-seen smile from him. It was as if in this moment all had been forgiven.

"We're finally headed to Reach." He said. "You're from Reach, aren't you, sir?"

"I am."

"I know you're excited. There's been some speculation we might get some shore leave there."

"I wouldn't bet on it. The pace is only picking up from here."

"I don't know. Judging by the Captain's appearance, I wouldn't be surprised if the man gives us a whole week there. We earned it, you know. Still have family at Reach?"

"They're all still there, yeah."

"Perfect chance to pay them a visit before we're on the move again. Me? I'm gonna visit my old stomping grounds if the Cappy lets me." Haze jabbed an elbow at my side. "You ever seen Hungarian women?"

In the periphery, Lawson suddenly placed his tray on the nearest flat surface within arm's reach and paced very briskly to the exit, his swift strides nearly breaking into a jog. Every occupant in the room took notice, but soon went back to their conversations.

Glancing back to Haze, I could see the hope return to his eyes. After all we endured, we did earn reprieve, very much so. But Operation Red Flag would wait for no one, rested or not, ready or not. It was too important.

"I hope we get that lucky, Haze, but I have a feeling we won't."

"Don't sell us short, LT. All troops know that Reach is where everyone goes to regroup, resupply, and relax."

Haze leaned closer to pat me on the back, and for that moment I was relieved he was in good spirits again. I smiled back.

The CNI lace interrupted our light-hearted chat and began forwarding a real-time audible unicast from the Captain himself.

"_Lieutenant Pennington, get to the bridge immediately_. _Our orders have changed_."

"What's going on, sir?"

"_Pleaseâ€¦just...you need to come here_."

The tone in the Captain's voice was uncharacteristic of himâ€”sounding troublesome. I'd witnessed a change in his bearing before, only on rare occasions such as when coming to certain realizations about the Transit or during the thrill moment everyone had experienced at its evaluation and subsequent achievements at Heraklyon. But this time, I detected something I hadn't heard before...

Panic.

"Excuse me, Sergeant," I said, proceeding to the exit, "I'm needed."

I began my walk toward the command deck with haste.

Captain Lawson never gave me a reason to doubt him or his mission, ambitious as the two were. Though it was entirely my own perception, I was sure most others would agree. More so, I could never fathom such an accomplished and brilliant mind having reasons to express such panic of the kind I had just detected. Like Gunny Smith, he was rock steady, albeit in a more disciplined way.

As I entered the bridge I could see him consulting a set of instructions, no doubt some special orders that Rosetta, the ship's AI, had kept locked away only to be opened under very specific circumstances. It was a handheld display he read from colored in a bright, orange/white/orange striping. I immediately found out why everyone else was standing at their stations as I gazed beyond and saw what was our final destination: Reach.

"We are to proceed directly to the IRIS Site in the event of a Bloody Arrow." He announced, scanning the readout. He shook his head, lips parsed. "I just can't imagine how the hell they got Reach."

There it was in plain view, another victim claimed by this War, its fiery form pulsing and glowing in the dark like some beacon of warning.

"Prepare the Emergency Scramble Order for the Thermisticles, Rosetta, and get us to SWORD Command alternate headquarter site, code-named IRIS. Exact coordinates: three degrees, fifty-four minutes, thirty-six seconds South latitude by thirty-eight degrees, forty-nine minutes, forty seconds East longitude. Alright, that's where we're headed. Damnit, Operation Red Flag is officially scrubbed. All bets are off, now, people. We're headed to Earth."

Reach was my home.

I had hoped to return this day to at least see its beauty from afar if there wasn't the chance to venture down and see familiar faces that grew up and found their paths in life. See how the world changed. This would be its last change for it was completely in ruin.

Just like Troy. Like Harvest. Jericho. Beta Hydrii and Zaragosa.

The Thermisticles would enter into slipspace again. What was left of Reach slowly disappeared from sight as the bow shield contracted

and warded off everything outside. I lost sight of it completely as heavy footsteps grew louder nearby. Amy walked toward me from the entry and I glanced her way.

She hadn't proceeded with her characteristic, fast and fluid pace. This time, she approached me without protocol and formalities. No salute rendered.

"The Captain wanted me to speak with you."

The _Thermisticles' _crew was a frenzied activity as she would once again journey in a race against time, only now _Earth_ was her final destination.

Everything occurring at the Bridge was a peripheral blur as I stared outward. My home planet's silhouette was still seared into my vision, but it would never be the same as I once knew it. A smothering wave of grief then pummeled like a thousand undertows all at once, my sight drowning in it—the realization that I was once again powerless to change it.

All I could do was remain here with uncertainty of what was next.

"I was almost too young to remember." Amy said.

I glanced sidelong and there she was still standing, staring at the same window I had been these last few moments.

"But I can never forget. I watched my world burn from the back of a Pelican. Smith was the only reason I was alive, and we were both lucky to make it out in time."

I brought a sleeve to my eyes, let the tears soak it for a moment while she continued.

"Everything was still being destroyed in our last moments above it all. I remember looking out at him, the sky, the places below that were still untouched, the last survivors giving thanks as we flew higher and higher. It was my last, good memory if you can understand that. I saw everything as I looked back. I was a child and I was afraid. The only thing I knew beside the fear was that I was alive. But when the fear was gone completely I realized I was alone. My friends and family and everything I ever knew would never be there again. The only thing taking their places over time was revenge. And we deserve to have it, you know. Hold onto it. It's all we have left."

"You ever think about an end, Amy?"

"To the War?"

"Think it'll _ever_ end?"

"You mean, who's going to win?"

"What if there is no winner?"

"There has to be a winner."

"Maybe it'll just go on with Human and Covenant obliterating each

other until both are gone and the galaxy has _nothing_ left."

"Maybe. We'll see. As for now, I think you know there's no going back. Once destroyed, the beauty of your world can never be repurchased at any price, including the price you make them pay."

She was absolutely right.

This was the next chapter. For us, everything had changed. We had to choose our battles, not let our grief consume us. She'd endured that lesson every day of her life, holding back her fullest, darkest potential toward the enemy. I would begin to follow in her path. Though Reach was the place I came from, that place wouldn't be in my own tale anymore. The fields, the street corners, the usual places I'd been and the familiar faces there. Sights, sounds, smells, all gone. Only memories would remain.

I wiped away tears, but they just kept coming. "I think this is the most words we've ever shared, Spartan."

The same anger she just spoke of now clouded my vision, giving me new eyes to see with.

It was the anger she'd carried inside her since she was young. She'd been fueled by a hatred many degrees higher than that of most who fought this War. She was fighting like any other but had more reason to. A particular vengeance was on the docket—her own, personal equation to balance. The anger wouldn't consume her, it hadn't yet. She'd obviously perfected her ability to contain it. She molded it over the years, honed it into a spear of retribution waiting for the right time to unleash it fully.

And I knew I had instantly changed once the tears stopped and I dried my eyes a moment later.

Looking to her now after this exchange of hearts, already she seemed transformed to me. Or, rather it had been I that underwent the change. Maybe both. Either way, she was surely more identifiable. Not in the way she had always projected strength and determination in the face of adversity; those traits of hers were a constant and would never falter. Rather, it was the barrier falling away. It was the complete understanding revealed between two people who had the same experience.

We locked gazes, and for that moment I saw more than myself in her reflection.

She was no longer foreign to me, no longer insular.

We were now the same.

"Tell me, Amelia, did you ever play football here at Reach when you were young?"

"Yes, and I never forgot you."

"I know."

** -THE END- **

The story continues with Ten Days in Mombasa

22. Drowning

As I lie face down and think about our past
>I become unsure of how victory could ever last
In times before we triumphed the valley below the sun
>Turned cheek and fled to Reach knowing our own world was done
We've since wandered the void endlessly waiting for our time to come
>But deep down all of us somehow knew that the Covenant had always won<p>

Returning home, I find myself wishing I was already gone
>How long does it take to find peace?
Well, I've waited for so long!

I think I'm drowning
>Can someone lend a hand?
Can someone out there save me?

>Because I truly don't think that I can<p>

We've come way too far to just turn around
>But faith is intangible if you've drowned
You cannot ease my pain, I'm lost
>I'm lost in this moment
Lying face down

End
file.